

# Meandering in Transition

## Thirty Years of Reforms and Identity-Building in Post- Communist Europe

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# Introduction

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It was June 4, 1989, when the first (partially) free election was held in a state behind the Iron Curtain, and its result proved to be of spectacular importance. In Poland, the opposition rallied around Solidarity Trade Union (*Solidarność*) won over the local Communist Party, launching anti-establishment movements across Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Demission of communist governments followed in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Ukraine, and elsewhere. Those processes were not always peaceful, neither were they truly consistent; however, they came as a brand-new wave of changes to the region.

The year 2021 marks the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of Soviet communism, a milestone for the region comprising former Soviet republics and state satellites. Each of these new sovereign entities has its own day of independence to celebrate, with the majority of them breaking away from the Kremlin's grip in 1989–1991.

The thirtieth anniversary is a good occasion to examine the post-communist transition in the region and assess it critically. This transition is a fascinating subject, with numerous examples of successes, failures, compromises, and U-turns by the states undergoing it.

This edited collection aims to present an analysis of the transitional events, focusing in particular on identity-building processes and reforms in CEE. It describes and scrutinizes the formation of geopolitical affiliations and the evolution of discourses of belonging. It also traces the fluctuating dynamics of national decision-making and institution-building, as many of the post-communist states reconsider their initial “idea of Europe” today. Finally, the collection touches upon the changing perceptions of the region's states on the part of major global actors—the European Union (EU), People's Republic of China, Russian Federation, and others.

The CEE is a very diverse region. Following the fall of the Iron Curtain, the pace and complexity of events that shaped political realities on the ground were dizzying. Some states accomplished a decisive break with the communist past and became members of European and transatlantic structures within almost a decade. Other states opted for pseudo-transition and fostered hybrid political regimes, jeopardizing their genuine integration with the West. Finally, there was a group of states which decided to preserve their communist legacy largely untouched, merely putting a more “human face” on its centralized practices.

This collection addresses the dynamics of the post-communist transition and identity-building, viewing them “from outside” and “from within” the region. The research focuses on the CEE states such as Belarus, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Ukraine. With their own style of communism, the states of the former Yugoslavia are not included, as they were considered neither members nor satellites of the USSR. Post-communist states in the Caucasus and Central Asia are also not considered in this study.

The collection consists of four parts, structured around conceptualizations of “transition” as they appear in different geographical contexts. Part I discusses regional European identity, the borders of Europe in political and imaginary spaces, democratization of the CEE states, and the global changes, which followed the fall of communism. Part II provides a “view from within” on the dynamics of post-communist transition and identity-building. It explains why events happened as they did in the states under scrutiny. Part III provides a “view from the outside,” addressing how European neighbors and Russia perceived the political developments in the CEE states. Part IV builds on part III and focuses on a global view. In particular, it traces how China, Japan, and the Middle East have changed their perceptions of CEE throughout the past thirty years.

Considering the specific chapters, part I opens with an investigation by Mykola Riabchuk. Embracing the lens of “Philosophic Geography,” he clarifies why CEE has always been the “Other” to the rest of Europe. He explains what motivated the Western powers to cut themselves off from CEE during the Cold War. He also describes how, in the context of that alienation, the local elites declared and maintained their nations’ connections to the West. Next, Mikhail Minakov analyzes the impact of the collapse of communism (and sovereign emancipation of CEE) on global affairs. He emphasizes the dynamics of reciprocal perceptions of the CEE region and the “outer world,” focusing in particular on attempts by external actors to predict post-communist developments. He specifies how Western expectations toward CEE changed over time—from constructing bold “prophesies” of a “bright democratic future” to switching to mere data collection when these “prophesies”

failed. The first part of this collection ends with reflections by Assen Slim on teleological and heterodox approaches to the systemic changes in CEE. Looking through the lens of economics, Slim concludes that the transition in the region is not yet complete. Communist-era institutions and governing principles continue to influence economic processes, differentiating them from those in Western Europe.

Part II describes how the CEE states elaborated their visions of Europe. The transition was an attempt to find a balance between—generally speaking—three identity pillars: European exceptionalism, European universalism, and transatlanticism. At different periods of time, regional states and societies tended to favor one of these three, while never altogether disregarding any of them. *Exceptionalism* may be defined here as a type of identity, which emanated from Greek philosophy, Westphalian sovereignty, and Christian morality. For many states, and particularly post-communist Poland and Hungary, this pillar became pivotal in the post-2004 period (see the chapter by Adrian Chojan); meanwhile, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania gave short shrift to this pillar in the 1990s, which may explain their friendly stance on Russia, relative selectivity in recognizing individual liberties, and troubles with the rule of law (see the chapters by Juraj Marušiak, Spasimir Domaradzki, and Robert Rajczyk). For other states, exceptionalism was less important during the past three decades (yet not completely overlooked). They preferred to perceive Europe as an entity constructed around universal values and human rights. For them, European nations were united in their diversity, which meant shared history, legislation, and political institutions but different cultures, visions of happiness, and social interaction patterns. This particularly was the case for Czechia, Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania in the 1990s (see the chapters by Juraj Marušiak and Li Bennich-Björkman). Ukraine and Moldova started paying greater attention to the *universalist* pillar in the post-2010 decade (see the chapter by Yevhen Mahda and Margaryta Khvostova). Finally, *transatlanticism* often reinforced the European universalism as it advocated the necessity of a deeper entrenchment in the Western world (e.g., NATO membership, which became pivotal for Romania, Bulgaria, Czechia, Poland, and other states). That said, this third pillar also occasionally eroded universalism and strengthened exceptionalism, given that transatlantic structures were regarded as inhibitors to EU integration (e.g., in Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia during the post-accession period). Then there has been the constant Russian factor, which encouraged many states in the region, among them war-torn Ukraine, to seek to advance their cooperation with the United States.

Fundamentally, the transitional process in CEE has always embraced the nostalgic features of “returning to the lost paradise”—be that the “imaginary” Europe or a more “abstract” West—the shape of which the CEE societies

and nations seemed to know better than the rest of the world. The paradox here is that that shape of the “lost paradise” has always remained subject to change, as it continuously vacillates between the aforementioned pillars and values. Only in Belarus is the “idea of Europe”—not to mention a broader, nationwide understanding of belonging to Europe—yet to be emancipated.

Part III is focused on how the neighboring actors build their relations with CEE. To outline the dynamics of these relations, the majority of chapters incorporate two thematic layers, namely, the attitudes of neighboring societies (as reflected in their popular culture and media messages) and official statements and actions. Andriy Tyushka opens this part with an assessment of the EU’s policies toward the region. He discusses the emergence of new, often imaginary post-2004 borders in CEE between the post-Soviet and post-communist states, as well as between the EU members and associates. He also outlines Brussels’ successes and failures in transforming the CEE states into “perfect” members of the EU during the past three decades. Next, Christopher Lash analyzes British attitudes, concluding that London usually prioritizes cooperation with Poland as a decisive regional power. As for the CEE region as such, London perceives it as a counterweight to the Franco-German core of the EU, showing optimism regarding its enlargement into the post-communist space. Bo Petersson argues that the Swedish authorities often tried to predict Russian reactions before embarking on regional policy. A similar approach was favored by the Italian authorities, as demonstrated by Serena Giusti and Fabio Parola—to say nothing of Rome maintaining cooperative relations with Moscow during the Cold War times and remaining today a cautious advocate of developing EU-Russian interdependencies. According to Eva Schäffler, in the early post-communist period, Germany aimed to “export” its best practices to the east, specifically to Czechia. Yet the CEE states, meandering between exceptionalist and universalist identity pillars, sometimes accepted and sometimes avoided accepting German consulting assistance. Finally, Rasmus Nilsson, writing of Russia, argues that the Kremlin fine-tunes its perception of CEE according to the dynamics of its own cooperation with the West. In other words, the Kremlin tends to perceive the states in the region variously as henchmen, mediums, or allies at different times.

With a similar structure and narration to the part III, part IV presents a global perspective on CEE. Anna Rudakowska and Emilian Kavalski open it with a chapter about evolution of China’s views on the region. These views often swung between extremes: from total nonacceptance of anti-communist protests of the 1990s to praising CEE as a part of the Global South and, thus, an important geopolitical asset in Beijing’s struggle against the West. Next, Manabu Sengoku claims that for the Japanese, the CEE region did not exist as a distinctive space in official and social discourses before the mid-1990s. A watershed change in perception happened in the early 2000s, when Japanese

businesses expanded into the region and the CEE sports and cultural brands became well-recognized on the island. Finally, the fourth part ends with Nedim Useinow's reflections on the history of the CEE cooperation with the Greater Middle Eastern region from the 1950s to date. Useinow concludes that the MENA states tend to underestimate the individual potential of the CEE actors and continue anchoring their development to Russia—CEE has still to manifest itself in MENA as a power to be reckoned with.

In sum, the edited collection *Meandering in Transition* aims to address the complexities of post-communist processes and their outcomes in the CEE region. We regret that many interesting submissions were not included due to time and space limitations. Nevertheless, as the editors we believe that the collection will add extra insight into the regional and global scholarship on the CEE transition. Our commitment is to further expand, develop, and polish this insight.

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