

## DISCUSSION

### BACK TO EUROPE AND THE SECOND TRANSITION IN CENTRAL EASTERN EUROPE

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**Abstract:** *Back-to-Europe and post-communist transition were the main objectives of Central European countries at the beginning of 90's. After 2004, when most of the CEE countries acceded to EU membership, followed by Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, a new transition began. This is a transition to knowledge society, as defined by Lisbon Agenda, whose objectives are not political, but economic, social and educational. This paper is devoted to the new transition process where the performance of each CEE country will depend on its human resources, tradition and management capacities.*

**Key words:** *Transition, educational reforms, knowledge society, Lisbon Agenda, Central and Eastern Europe*

### Introduction

This analysis is a follow-up to the previous English issue of *Orbis scholae* (2/2007<sup>1</sup>) dedicated to "Transformation of educational systems in the Visegrad countries". Based on a broader geographical coverage, this article supports the idea of second transition in CEE countries, shared also by Halasz (2007) in his article published as a part of previous *Orbis scholae* issue.

**Transition** was one of the catch-words of the '90s. Although the term as such denotes any change from one state to another, from one stage of evolution to another, transition became a major topic of political analysis particularly after the post-communist revolutions of 1989. Whether it was the "velvet revolution" in Czechoslovakia, the "televised revolution" in Romania, the "melancholic revolution" in Hungary or the "singing revolution" in Estonia, the goal was the same: to replace totalitarian rule with democratic regimes. A new phrase was coined "countries in transition" designating ex-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe.

The change of political regime thus inaugurated a new historical stage, under

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<sup>1</sup> The full-text of the previous issue of *Orbis scholae* journal on "Transformation of educational systems in the Visegrad countries" (Walterová & Greger 2007) could be downloaded from the following URL: [http://www.orbisscholae.cz/archiv/2007\\_02.pdf](http://www.orbisscholae.cz/archiv/2007_02.pdf)

the generic name "transition". The term designates an **interregnum situation**, which requires more or less clear reference points for the destination of transition, intermediary stages and the changes this process involves.

In a well-known book entitled "Reflections on the Revolutions in Europe" Dahrendorf compared post-communist transitions to crossing the desert in biblical times and the need for Moses' people to wander across the desert for 40 years so that only the new generation who knew nothing of servitude, would reach the Promised Land.

The situation in the 20 years covered by the peoples in the ex-communist countries turned out to be quite different. The period of 'wandering' across the sands of transition was shorter but it raised huge issues impossible to anticipate. In the end, post-communist transition was not so much a peaceful change of regime, a linear translation process, but rather a race with plenty of hurdles. Transition did not just bring under discussion the political regimes prior to 1990's, it shook the pillars of social order such as stability and continuity, social legitimacy and mobilisation, civic culture and the system of values. As an historical experience, transitions in Central and Eastern Europe led to the resolution of issues specific to the respective countries. It also provided **learning experiences**, which could prove useful to the new wave of post-communist transitions in the western Balkans (Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina) or former Soviet countries (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia).

What are the lessons to be learned from the 15-year-experience of post-communist transitions in Central and Eastern Europe? The lessons differ widely from one country to another. In broad terms, the major trends were as follows:

1. Post-communist transitions created a **fast changing social environment** which affected all public sectors and policies. In some cases these changes were impossible to monitor thus making it difficult to coordinate and assess the effects. Hence, the common belief that transition changes were spontaneous, influenced by external factors rather than the product of well structured programmes.
2. Transitions intensified the **differences existing between former communist countries** prior to 1990. Apparently homogeneous and unitary owing to the common governing ideology, these countries were actually quite different in terms of readiness for transition to capitalism and democracy culture. Pre-war experience of democracy and competitiveness as well as the quasi-reforms conducted from within the communist parties in the name of communism with a human face, commonly known as "perestroika" really counted.
3. Education underwent **modernization reforms** (of methods, textbooks and curriculum contents) as well as **restructuring reforms** (in management, legislation and financing). Educational reforms attempted to follow the general pace of political and economic changes without anticipating them and without turning education into the major lever of social changes. It was only in the late '90s that **systemic reforms** were envisaged in countries like Hungary, the Czech Republic or Slovenia, which placed learning in the centre of public policies.

4. In general, with some differences in favour of countries in Central Europe the experience of transition highlighted the existence of a **vicious circle of human resources**: on the one hand, political and economic reforms depended on available human resources, on the other hand investment in human resources development was limited by economic and social performances. We might even go so far as to say that the differences between countries in transition were due to the differences in human resources management.
5. From a social and cultural point of view, post-communist transitions resolved many problems while creating and intensifying **new issues** either unknown or controlled before 1990: brain drain, degradation of public services for culture and healthcare, deepening social inequalities, long term unemployment, emergence of subcultures and consumerism, erosion of motivation for learning.

In a study devoted to post-communist transitions from the perspective of value changes (Bîrzea, 1996), we noted the formation of an **“interregnum culture”** that cannot be reduced to the modernity/post-modernity scheme applicable to Western societies.

The following trends characterise this particular culture:

- a) The emblematic values of communism (e.g. revolutionary militancy, patriotic labour, class struggle, submission to the state-party) are on the verge of extinction. They are manifest only in those that remain nostalgic about former regime and take the form of collectivist or egalitarian reactions, an effect of residual communism.
- b) On the other hand, new values have emerged, deemed unacceptable under the previous regime: freedom, personal initiative, political pluralism, human rights, critical thinking, multiculturalism.
- c) Traditional values, prohibited by the communist regime, such as nationalism, elitism, monarchy, religion, privacy and property, have re-emerged and are relatively influent.
- d) Some values associated with the old regime persist yet they have either changed content (e.g. equality, solidarity, citizenship, membership, well-being) or are no longer considered so important (e.g. loyalty, discipline, altruism, collectivity).

The element that very few analysts foresaw in the early 90s was the **European Union’s capacity** to extend towards the east by integrating a large share of the “countries in transition”. Initially, on the background of post-revolutionary euphoria, one of the most influential slogans was **“Back to Europe”**. Everybody saw Europe as the Promised Land, the place of freedom and prosperity they had become abusively estranged from. “Back to Europe” was seen primarily as a sign of normality and historical justice. However, EU membership was not listed in any of the political programmes or documents of the 1989 revolutions.

Obviously, 20 years on, these objectives have undergone notable changes. For most ex-communist countries, with the exception of the member countries of the Community of Independent States, “Back to Europe” means first and foremost **EU**

**membership.** This status confirms the end of transition, represents the official recognition of having met the three Copenhagen criteria, two of which refer directly to post-communist transition objectives: the realisation of a democratic regime and of a functional market economy. Are we to understand that gaps have been eliminated entirely? Could it be that the respective countries have entered a new period of transition whose purpose is no longer a change of regime but a transformation of the entire social system? If we admit the fact that transition means first of all “societal learning” (in the sense attributed by Botkin, Elmandja & Malitza, 1972) and that historical recovery requires more than 15 years, then the statement that post-communist transitions end simply by accession to the European Union needs to be more carefully revised.

Some authors (cf. De Soto and Anderson) hasten to speak of the start of a new stage, even more dramatic than post-communist transition, which they call “**post-transition**”. Others, like Rosati (1998), based on macroeconomic analyses, maintain that the gaps will persist for many years to come. Realising a market economy, Rosati says, is not sufficient for an effective EU membership. As you can see in Table 1, modelled on Rosati’s (1998, p. 42–43), the duration of the “**new transition**” will be numbered in decades, unlike the post-communist transition of the ‘90s that lasted only 10-15 years. If you take as a reference point the level reached by the three poor countries at the time of their accession to the EU (Greece, Spain and Portugal) and calculate the annual growth rate, you will get very different transition rates, all of them very long: 7-9 years for Slovenia and 81-87 years for Bulgaria.

**Table 1:** Long-term growth projection for CEEC (apud: Rosati, 1998)

Country	Number of years to average to EU-3	
	Barro growth rate	Levine-Renelt methodology
Czech Republic	9	12
Estonia	33	36
Hungary	19	20
Latvia	81	70
Lithuania	55	52
Poland	24	29
Slovakia	30	49
Slovenia	7	9
Bulgaria	87	81
Romania	65	60
Croatia	75	71
Albania	48	63
Macedonia, FY	53	55

These estimates are absolutely shocking. Fortunately, they are hardly credible:

they are too optimistic in the case of Albania and too pessimistic by comparison with countries that already have positive results in terms of EU integration, namely Latvia and Estonia.

However, we have cited these data for two reasons. Firstly, because they draw attention to existing gaps and the difficulties of the new transitions, after the “Back to Europe” euphoria and secondly, it is interesting to note the point of view of economists that reduce transition to a never-ending historical catching up. At any rate this point of view is contradicted by the EU which indicate that in the area of education countries in Central and Eastern Europe have come close to and in some cases have even gone beyond the EU average.

Our paper focuses on the relationship between post-communist transitions and EU integration. To be precise, we will concentrate on the **new transition stage** entailed by EU accession and its significance for educational policies.

For obvious reasons, this analysis cannot circumvent the context initiated by the **Lisbon Strategy** and its effect on the new member states and candidate countries. In this sense, we will start off from two basic assumptions:

- *First:* According to the Lisbon Agenda, all EU member countries as well as candidate countries may still be considered countries in transition; the common goal of these countries is to realise a knowledge-based society. In other words, we are speaking of a **new transition**, whose objectives are not political, but economic, social and educational.
- *Second:* after accomplishing political pluralism and market economy, countries in Central and Eastern Europe must perfect the cultural and educational transition. In the '90s educational reforms followed or were merely associated with political and economic changes. The new transition inaugurated by EU accession and the Lisbon Agenda is based first of all on education and training, as the major priorities of public policies.

These work premises capitalize on a thesis we launched in an earlier study (Birzea, 1994), namely the thesis of **multiple transitions** according to which post-communist transition actually consists of three interdependent transitions, each with its own duration and objectives:

- **political transition** is the quickest and can be accomplished in approximately 5 years;
- **economic transition** is slower and can be achieved in approximately 10 years, depending on the degree of communization of the economic system;
- **cultural transition** is the slowest, and needs to be spaced out over one generation (approximately 25 years), because it involves changing values, attitudes, competences, social relations and life styles.

The first two were accomplished over the 15 years of post-communist transition. The third is still ongoing and it will undoubtedly be accelerated by EU membership and the Lisbon Agenda.

Despite the multiple educational reforms conducted in the '90s in ex-communist

countries, investment in human resources was not a priority. Post-communist transition was first of all an economic and political transition. The main goal of educational reforms was to gradually correct the old system (e.g. by eliminating communist ideology), modernizing the curricula, school management and teacher training schemes. These modernising or catching-up reforms were prevalingly focused on the immediate issues of their particular educational systems. The effects of globalisation and the opening up of educational systems to the outside world remained subsidiary goals.

If within this context we apply Carnoy's (1999, p. 37) classification of educational reforms, we will notice that the experience of the '90s in transition countries is very similar to "**equity-driven**" and "**finance-driven**" reforms. Although this scheme is not a perfect fit in all situations<sup>2</sup>, we can conclude that the top priorities in the '90s were equity-related measures (e.g. learning facilities for population at risk, non-discrimination and quality education for all) and financial support for public policies in education and training. With a few exceptions, all countries in transition resorted to conditioned loans from the World Bank. The influence of external resources was so great that some countries (e.g. Romania and Bulgaria) even ran the risk of educational policies becoming incoherent, owing to their excessive dependence on external donors. Each of the latter had specific objectives and their own philosophy of education which did not always coincide with the priorities set at national level.

Carnoy's three reform strategies are not mutually exclusive. They express however, three distinct priorities. The Lisbon Agenda and its objectives in education and training is a clear example of **competitiveness-driven reform**. For the very first time in EU history, the Lisbon European Council (2000) placed education, culture, research and training in the centre of community policies. By assuming the strategic objective of becoming the most competitive knowledge-based economy, the European Union proved that it understood the crucial role of human resources development, until then the responsibility of national states. Even if, as indicated by the Kok Report (2004) and the Maastricht Study (Tessaring and Wannan, 2004), the objectives of the Lisbon process have been only partially reached, what matters is that in the European context a new period of transition has begun, where learning is called upon to play a key role.

Assuming the objectives of the Lisbon Agenda<sup>3</sup>, the new member countries as well as the candidate countries implicitly became involved in this **new process of transition**. As in the case of post-communist transition, the performance of each country will depend on actual resources and resource management capacity.

From this perspective three key-questions could become the subject of intense debate:

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2 This analysis is valid particularly for Eastern European countries (eg. Romania and Bulgaria). In the Central European states (eg. Czech Republic, see Greger & Walterová, 2007, p. 37–41) the equity measures were initiated mainly by the NGOs, they were not the state priorities of early 90's.

3 For details, access:<http://europa.eu.int/com/education/policies/2010>;  
<http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/keydoc/2002/progobj-en.pdf>

- To what extent are educational systems in Central and East European countries ready for globalisation and Europeanisation?
- Did the reforms of the '90s anticipate the exigencies of the new transition to a knowledge-based economy?
- What kind of gaps remain and how wide are they (i.e. the gaps between the new and the old EU member states, the new member states and candidate countries, and between the new member states themselves)?

Our paper limits itself to the three questions formulated above and attempts to find at least partial answers.

In order to do this, we will refer to the data provided in the Commission's Reports ("Education across Europe 2008")<sup>4</sup> as well as the Kok Report and the Maastricht Study.

First of all, we noticed that there is no overall gap between the performances of the new member countries and the EU average. Unlike macroeconomic analyses which support the idea of one **wide and enduring gap** between economic performances, educational indicators point to a **wide variance** of education systems.

In some cases (e.g. public expenditure for education, ratio of those who completed at least ISCED 3 for education, ratio of pupils to teaching staff, participation in scientific studies), new member countries (NMCs) have even obtained results above EU average. The areas where NMCs lag behind are participation in lifelong learning, private expenditure for education and number of foreign students. The closest to the EU average in general are the Czech Republic and Slovenia. Overall, the data in education and training do not confirm the macroeconomic analysis conducted by Rosati and authors (Barro, Levine and Renelt) which supports the thesis of a 10-year to 80-year-delay compared to the three poor countries at the time of accession (Spain, Portugal and Greece).

The gaps are so great, says Rosati, that NMCs actually only benefit from a "quasi membership". We do not have the competencies to judge either such evaluations or the superficial differentiation that some politicians still make between the "New Europe" and the "Old Europe"<sup>5</sup>.

What is absolutely certain however, is that we cannot make any such clear-cut distinctions in **education**, nor can we declare without a shadow of a doubt that one geopolitical region is "more recent", more dynamic or more interesting than another.

In the second place, despite the aforementioned convergence there are striking differences in terms of **competitiveness** and **quality of educational systems** in

4 Progress towards the Lisbon Objectives in Education and Training. Indicators and Benchmarks 2008, Brussels, European Commission, 2008.

5 Obviously such classifications are merely opportunistic and context-driven. Europe is just as old and everlasting whether its roots are in the East or in the West. Europe in Herodot's time was located in the Balkans and the Diets in Central Europe were simultaneous with similar Parliamentary settings in Western Europe.

NMCs and EU-15 countries. These differences are visible especially if we take as points of reference the skills assessment resulting from PISA international surveys or the percentage of graduates in mathematics, science and technology (ISCED 5A, 5B or 6). In the '90s, countries in Central and Eastern Europe modernized textbooks and curriculum contents, introduced ICT on a wide scale and conducted VET reforms. These changes were made mainly in relation to their own criteria and the training needs of their specific labour market. The respective reforms were carried out in a national framework without taking into account what Laval and Weber (2002) call "new world educational order".

Finally, the Lisbon Agenda provides exceptional opportunities for Central and East European countries. In just a few years, they have made **considerable progress** (with the exception of private financing in education and participation in lifelong learning). Among the countries with the best performances we find CEE countries have reached four of the five benchmarks: share of early school leavers (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia), reading literacy (Latvia, Poland), upper secondary completion rate (Slovakia, Czech Republic, Slovenia), graduates in mathematics, science and technology (Slovakia, Poland).

In other words, like the EU-27 group, the new members and candidate countries have mixed results in education. There is no "best" educational system, meeting all criteria, just as there is no "last" system under all international rankings. CEE countries have returned to Europe, and found it confronted with its own historical transition, which ought to restore its international supremacy.

Post-transition, post-industrial revolution or just a catching-up exercise? For new member countries, "Back to Europe" means all of these together. They approach the new transition with the recent experience of rapid and substantial social changes. They are therefore ready for a new stage of systemic changes and educational reforms. They must, nonetheless learn two new things, crucial for the success of the new transition. On the one hand, lifelong learning and investment in human resources must be placed in the centre of public and economic policies. On the other hand, transition to a knowledge-based economy is a collective endeavour, accomplished by the open method of coordination. This is an entirely new experience, quite different from the egocentric and nation-centred efforts of the '90s.

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