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## **DEMOCRATISATION AND ADMINISTRATIVE REFORMS: LESSONS LEARNED FROM DEMOCRATIC POST-SOCIALIST TRANSITION**

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Transition in post-socialist world is a complex social phenomenon, taking place in countries of different size, pre-socialist legacy, economic potentials, different political actors and processes, geography and geostrategic situations, and different cultural and societal frames.

It is a systemic transformation of affected countries, at least many scholars, politicians and other individuals think so. However, we still too often believe its meaning, desirable values, goals, and components to be self-evident. In addition, we can easily observe that the outcomes of this particular transition process are not the same in all countries.

The literature on organisational change instructs us that analysing changes means taking an account of the **content**, the **context**, the **process**, and the **outcomes** of changes (cf. Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999).

Content issue opens the questions of the values, goals, tasks, and components that have oriented transition processes in European post-socialist countries and that have been their main streams.

Contextual variables are those major factors in the transitional landscape that predominantly influenced the course and success in achieving the desirable results.

Focus on processes means researching transition dynamics, including various paths, stages, events, critical junctures, and the like.

Finally, the question of results and outcomes calls for evaluative approach in studying transition, in order to establish the results of this massive transformation process.

### Post-socialist transition – content issues

The expected transformation has had several components:

- political (multiparty system, free elections, democratisation, citizen participation),
- governance (decentralisation, ‘publicization’ of state administration, professionalism, quality of governance, effective control over public administration),
- economic (privatisation, free-market economy, entrepreneurship),
- legal (the rule of law, human rights, constitutionalism, legal protection of citizens),
- cultural (free expression in works of art and culture),
- social (wide interpretation of individual freedoms, protection of disadvantaged social groups, positive assistance of government, social justice).

### Post-socialist transition – contextual issues

The transition of the former socialist countries in Europe has been accompanied by several important historical events and developments that have marked it and influenced the course and outcomes of the transitional processes. They called for the adoption of new, appropriate types and instruments of public governance.

The most prominent process has been Europeanization in terms of accession to the European Union and harmonisation with the EU *acquis communautaire* and other standards. The Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia were in the first and largest group of transition countries that joined the EU on 1st May 2004. Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU on 1st January 2007 and Croatia on 1st July 2013. Other countries in transition have different prospects of the EU accession.

Many countries in transition invested serious energy in the fulfilment of membership standards of various other international organisations, beginning with the OUN and its agencies, the Council of Europe, NATO, the OECD, etc. Among the standards are also the well-known legal charters of human rights and fundamental freedoms. This huge body of international agreements, conventions, charters, and other sources of international and European law, supported by a complex network of various international bodies, including

the courts, ensures the principles of the rule of law and human rights for the citizens of transitional countries.

In the economic sphere, the main process was the privatisation of the former state or social ownership and the establishment of an institutional framework for free market economy.

Wars and deep instability especially affected the countries on the former Yugoslav territory, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia, asking for fresh, specific governance solutions.

Furthermore, transitional countries were also influenced by the world financial and economic crisis that started in 2007. It led to austerity policy based on implementation of various austerity measures in the governance systems.

Finally, several transitional countries have been grasped by illiberal tendencies, which may easily endanger democratic values and governance standards.

On top of domestic circumstances suitable for the development of illiberal movements and politics, certain transitional countries were faced with the 2015-2016 wave of mass migration, the largest migration of people to and within Europe since World War II, mainly caused by the war in Syria which created more than 10 million internally displaced people and refugees. Other demographic changes, such as economic emigration to more developed EU countries, brain drain, and others, can be also mentioned.

Finally, Western technical assistance to transitional countries must be mentioned. Its purpose has been to give a clear orientation and firm support to transitional countries in their endeavour to harmonize with the necessary European and international standards. There are numerous bitter assessments of that assistance, and many more bitter experiences in Eastern Europe (Sobis & de Vries, 2009; Nemeč, 2008). What can be generally concluded is that Western standards, concepts and recommendations for Eastern Europe are far from unequivocal, and that the attempts to foster one-sided model based on the new public management do not really fit the circumstances of Eastern European countries. Such a situation not only opens the possibility for but also requires the development of genuine domestic responses to mammoth governance challenges.

### Post-socialist transition – process issues

Temporal dimension of transition shows certain regularity at least in the group of new EU member states:

after a) early Europeanisation and semi-formal pre-accession preparations they entered into  
b) formal accession process with substantial legal and governance harmonisation, and ended in  
c) various post-accession tracks of administrative development with a possibility available to many of the new EU member states to use the money from EU funds for public administration reform.

In addition, the European Commission has delivered its recommendations to new member states about the necessary administrative and governance changes in this last phase, within the European semester procedure. Moreover, the Commission established the Structural Reform Support Service in 2015, to foster, among other commitments, governance and public administration improvements in the member states. It has been expected that the role of this Service will be even more important in the future, supporting those administrative changes aimed at the better quality of governance. If such expectations are realistic, convergence of public governance may be well on track in the member states. The EU neighbourhood policy spreads influence to the other countries in transition, regardless whether they are officially granted the EU candidate status or not.

#### Post-socialist transition – evaluation (results and outcomes)

There are different transition results in different groups of post-socialist countries.

The transition of the former socialist (communist) countries can be compared with several other democratic, economic, and other transitions in the world, from postcolonial transition in Africa, to post-dictatorial transitions in Greece, Spain, and Portugal, to Arab Spring. European post-socialist transition may be defined as more than partial or sectoral transition from the authoritarian rule to democracy: it is a systemic, comprehensive, multidimensional transformation of a society, tackling almost every aspect of social life, not just the political change of governance system. The span of transition processes is one of the crucial differences between post-socialist transition and other democratic transitions in the world (cf. Stark & Bruszt, 1998; Marčetić, 2005).

Because we research and analyse overall transformation of society, the results and outcomes need to be evaluated in different spheres:

- Politics
- Economy
- Welfare and social solidarity

- Human rights and the rule of law
- Governance and public administration
- Culture and art.

I will not speak about all of them here. My focus is on governance.

The best performers in terms of governance, but also in terms of other results, are those countries that joined the European Union – the new member states. According to my previous research, Europeanisation has been one of the most powerful driving forces of transformation (cf. Koprić, 2017, etc.).

Some of the most distinct governance changes and changes of public administration identified by comparative analyses are:

- Centralization of national public administrations which have become increasingly integrated networks of multi-level governance,
- Mushrooming of public agencies, especially at the national level, with increasing role of independent regulators,
- Strengthened position of the executive, and diminished role of national parliaments,
- Redistribution of power at the ministerial level in favour of the ministries of finance, agriculture, regional development, and the like,
- New tendency towards regionalization and strengthening of other institutions dealing with the implementation of regional policy and regional development,
- Narrowed local competences and reduced autonomy of local governments,
- Enhanced role of private and non-governmental providers of public services,
- A new quest for more intensive citizen participation with increasing efforts to make public administrations more transparent and open (input legitimacy),
- Attempts to foster strategic planning, design sound policy processes, and initiate data-driven evaluations,
- Efforts to develop modern, professional civil service, and promote public administration education that fits that end,
- Setting anti-corruption institutions and new ethic infrastructure of civil service,
- Focus on quality of governance and provision of better public services, etc. (cf. Kovač & Bileišis, 2017).

Despite certain harmonisation and convergence, the results and outcomes of governance reforms are not simple, uniform and unambiguous.

Having in mind that many dwindling governance ideas during the first stage of Europeanisation and semi-formal pre-accession preparations came from the various international actors, from the International Monetary Fund and World Bank to the OECD-

Sigma on behalf of the European Commission, it is not a surprise that the final product was muddled governance, i.e. governance with strong reliance on the classical government with weak forms of inter-jurisdictional and third-party governance that arise when less than clear external ideas about public administration reform flow into shrinking domestic ideas on governance (Koprić, 2012). From time to time, the result could be named *lovely-jubbly governance*.<sup>1</sup>

However, during the late 2000s and 2010s we can observe the process of easier, more natural spreading of the European Administrative Space ideas throughout the transition countries. Factors that have contributed to that development are:

- More clear foundation of European governance ideas on good governance model,
- Streamlining governance ideas promoted by the OECD-Sigma in line with real needs of transition and neighbouring countries, and
- Withdrawal from the one-fits-all western recipes for public administration reforms.

We have more and more evidence about strengthening of the European Administrative Space (cf. Koprić, 2017). Two recent projects procured by the European Commission should be mentioned in this context. Their titles are EUPACK and EUPACK2 (*Support for developing better country knowledge on public administration and institutional capacity building*). Within them several detailed national reports were prepared for the Commission, about the basic characteristics; reform trends and dynamics; the role and effect of external support to public administration reform; and some other issues. Only national reports and a comparative study on the characteristics of public administration have been published (cf. EC, 2017 and national reports). A wide comparison and systematisation becomes possible on the basis of these reports, which have been prepared according to a uniform methodology and structure of national reports.

### Lessons learned

1. The simple concept(s) of democratic transition is not sufficient to convey the comprehensiveness and richness of real historical changes that have taken place in European post-socialist countries for the past three decades. More detailed analyses have to be undertaken if we want to get better and deeper insights into complex social and governance interdependencies.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “muddled governance” is partly inspired by the seminal work of Charles E. Lindblom on policy making as the science of “muddling through”. Lindblom, 1959.

2. Taking detailed accounts of particular issues within the complex post-socialist transformation picture can be useful if it is well-connected with the account of overall transformation endeavour. Only in that way can we improve our understanding of post-socialist transition.
3. We know when transition began, we can identify the goals, the components, the contextual variables, the critical junctures, the actors, the processes, and other important dimensions but we do not know for sure if the post-socialist transition has been completed and when. We are even more uncertain about the transition outcomes.
4. Transition is a rather vague concept. At the beginning of the post-socialist transition there was a mix of expectations about the introduction of democracy, market economy and some other societal changes but they were not precisely defined. Since we have not precisely defined the wanted institutional and societal changes, the assessments of real processes and effects are inevitably wide, general, imprecise, and susceptible to manipulation.
5. The transition process was not programmed in many of its components. It was founded mostly on emotions, not on rational strategic planning and decision-making approach. The actors were not even aware of all transition aspects and tasks that would occur during the complex transformation processes.
6. A desire for the individual political, economic, and cultural freedoms was accompanied by the national spur. Several countries separated from the previous states, from the Baltics, to the Czech and Slovak Republic to South Eastern Europe, claiming the right to self-determination. In the case of former Yugoslavia, the tendency of establishing independent states resulted in a series of wars in the 1990s in spite of the fact that such a right had been constitutionalised for decades. Moreover, nationalism is a base for current populist movements and tendencies throughout the world of post-socialist transition.
7. Harmonisation with the Council of Europe's standards was among important first transition steps in all European post-socialist countries. The second step for some of them was application for the EU membership. Although Europeanisation has been a powerful convergence force, influencing the development of transitional public governance systems, the principle of equifinality has overcome the wish for deeper harmonisation (harmonisation of institutions), which is a base for institutional divergence. Equifinality means that a more or less identical end state or goal can be achieved by different means, instruments, and institutions. Such realistic and patient indulgence, especially during early Europeanisation and the EU accession, caused a degree of organisational and institutional divergence.

8. The transition of public governance systems in transition countries was not a uniform process. The best we can do is to group these countries in clusters or groups of countries with similar institutions and development of governance. If we research the transition countries which have not been so strongly influenced by Europeanisation as the new EU member states from CEE and SEE regions, we can find even more diverse public governance processes and institutions.
9. National, domestic actors have played the crucial role in the development of public governance systems in their respective countries. They have been so mighty that we may say they have a veto power even with regard to the process of Europeanisation. Slovakia and Croatia of the 1990s are an example of powerful national actors who delayed and weakened the Europeanisation process. Other countries can be added to the list afterwards.
10. Regarding the post-accession period, it seems relevant to ask if Europeanisation, meaning the intention and activities to produce similarities in public governance systems of European countries, from decentralisation to respect of human rights and basic freedoms, is still a driving force of societal and governance changes. Or, maybe, the national actors from transition countries are powerful enough to be able to stop and reverse the convergence processes.
11. Elements from the transition and democratisation theories, as well as the organisation change and neo-institutional theoretical approaches may be used to establish a comprehensive composite theoretical model suitable for better understanding and researching the complex phenomena of post-socialist transformation.

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