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Pacts and Conflicts in Post-communist Transformations: In Search of a New Social Contract

Laurentiu Stefan-Scalat

Introducing the topic

After a decade of radical transformations, it is probably time to ask ourselves about the foundations of the revamped political communities of Eastern Europe.

This is a perennial and a timely question at the same time. It admittedly belongs to the family of those crucial issues that haunted political philosophers for centuries. It is timely, because at the end of the twentieth century East European polities have been faced with the daunting task of recasting themselves, of “reinventing” themselves through politics.¹ At first sight, this “reinvention of politics” could sim-

¹ Vladimir Tismaneanu insightfully captured this dimension in his book, *Reinventing Politics. Eastern Europe from Stalin to Havel* (1992).

ply mean new “rules of the game,” open party competition, and political actors with democratic legitimacy. However, the notion probes deeper and suggests that first and foremost, it is about rethinking the nature and the foundations of the political community.

The East European societies were held together by the tight grip of the communist rule, or, in the few happier cases (Hungary, for example), by what was called an implicit pact between different social groups (workers, intelligentsia) and the ruling party. In other countries, the community-building strategies sponsored by the communists were seasoned with nationalist propaganda and a suffocating cult of personality (as in Romania).

In the aftermath of the 1989 revolutions it was hoped that democracy itself would provide the new cement for the revived polities. The expectations proved to be much too high, and although the basic mechanisms of democracy work reasonably well in this part of Europe, it would be a gross exaggeration to say that post-communist societies hold together just because they are (or try to become) democratic.

Democratization is in any case only a part of the story. There are alternative theories of what is/should be the social bond and only some of them accommodate democratic principles. Theories of (ethno)nationalism are probably the most recurrent in scholarly debates, especially when democratic failures of some post-communist states need to be accounted for. Beyond, or in conjunction with ethnicity, there are other “structural givens” such as religion or culture that are usually seen as providing the basis for collective identities.

My interest in this paper is to investigate the role of politics in fostering or hindering the emergence of a genuine and inclusive political community. This is a rather broad area of research, and one in which different approaches, theoretical as well as empirical, could prove equally suited. My narrow focus is on pacts between major political actors, on explicit agreements seeking to settle existing conflicts or to prevent the emergence of new ones. These pacts are political means to reach clearly defined political goals. They play, however, a more significant role in that they provide a set of arrangements that could add up to a kind of social contract.

My research question could, therefore, be formulated as follows: Are there any indications that the new polities of Eastern Europe are (also) based on elements of a social contract and on an expanded awareness of the importance thereof?

This approach has a number of advantages over concurrent interpretations. It has a clearly pragmatic thrust that makes an empirical investigation possible. At the

same time, it is firmly rooted in theory, addressing fundamental issues of political philosophy.

When we leave the philosophical realms behind and try to understand empirical realities, a broad question like this one presupposes a number of things. First, modern societies (including post-communist ones) are structurally different and socially diverse. They are, in other words, crossed by a significant number of cleavages. Second, groups defined by some of these cleavages or clustered around more or less well defined interests or values interact with each other, to promote their goals and to find a common ground for coexistence when these interests or values conflict. Third, these groups usually hold claims of representing or articulating the will and the voice of an unorganized larger strata of the population.

The social pacts are not, therefore, treated as a soft metaphor, but as a network of hard facts of political life worked out by actors representing or embodying interests or political values. The pacts are, however, only the end-product of a chain of (not always friendly) interactions. A discussion of conflicts between these actors (preceding, accompanying or following the establishment of pacts) ties in very well with this pragmatic view.

A thorough assessment should, in principle, reveal the relation between the map of conflicts (or confrontational interactions) and the map of pacts, and answer the question: which types of conflict are concluded by settlements and which are not? It should also explain which, among the later, are bearable and which are not. In my view, any discussion of pacts will also have to take into account the absence of conflict, as an indication of the impossibility of some groups or actors to organize themselves politically, to articulate their goals and to fight for them successfully in the new political arenas.

The encounter with theories of conflicts and various assertions about their consequences was therefore unavoidable. In my argument I question the heavy stress that is laid on ethnic conflicts at the expense of other types of conflicts and the oversized importance that is given to the multi-ethnic character of a society in explaining a number of political failures. I contend that an approach centered mainly or exclusively on ethnic conflicts has, in many cases, little to say about this practical process of community-building. There are other tensions, if not conflicts, with no ethnic content, that greatly affect this process and the operations of political institutions more generally.

In this context, my point is also that the apparent stability and the lack of conflict could indicate that a fracturing process is taking place. My view thus challenges the common understanding that only the intensity of conflict is a good indication

of further dangers and problems. Maybe the balance (or the distribution) of power is such that the possibility of conflict is not even contemplated. Some people (or groups) might just feel defeated before entering into any kind of conflictual interactions with those who have more resources.

In the literature on transitions there is widespread recognition of the fact that institutions have a “containing” effect on conflicts. Hence, for East European countries, institutionalization is counted among the crucial determinants of a consolidated democracy. I take this approach to be overoptimistic and largely neglectful of the fact that in some cases the conflicts are inherent in the institutions themselves, and could impact negatively on their daily operations.

The reader should be aware that this paper aims mainly to sketch the lines of further debates rather than providing thoroughly-researched answers. The information on East European transformations is drawn from the literature and from the insights this author has acquired by closely following the social and political developments in Romania over the last decade.

Conflicts and pacts in post-communist Eastern Europe

In a pluralistic society, securing social cohesion and building a viable and lasting political community usually imply a good and effective management of conflicts whose occurrence is more or less inevitable. But as political philosophers and political scientists acknowledged long ago, some conflicts prove more intractable than others. The outcomes of these conflicts are usually violent, involving bloodshed and leading to the collapse of institutional arrangements. And it is rare when their source is not an ethnic cleavage.

Unfortunately, when it comes to the matter of conflict in post-communist societies there is an almost exclusive focus on ethnic conflict. The presence or absence of large minorities in these societies certainly complicates the political transition. Besides, the recent bloodshed associated with the break up of federal states in the post-communist world adds gravity to the warnings that multiethnic polities are under considerable strains. This is indeed a serious matter, but one which is, in my opinion, overstated as I will try to show below. Moreover, I would argue, it overshadows other types of conflicts and systematic interactions with less visible but equally important consequences. Most East European societies still appear fraught with divisive tensions even after removing ethnicity-contentious issues.

Repositioning the ethnic conflict

The bulk of scholarly interest in conflicts with an ethnic component could be explained in different ways. Probably, it is spurred (or in any case accompanied) by excessive media coverage. Certainly there are more “scientific” grounds. First, the independent variable presupposes groups whose boundaries are relatively clear: ethnicity provides a stable and easily identifiable line of cleavage. Second, the dependent variable has equally visible indicators: physical violence, bloodshed, disruption of the “normal” public life and/or change or dispute over territorial borders.

There were many attempts to put forth theories of politically relevant conflicts, and the one who, to my limited knowledge, came closest in accomplishing this was Robert Dahl (1967, chapter 10). He and many other authors have tried to identify other sources of conflicts and to classify them according to their “disruptive” potential. There are conflicts which have structural reasons, i.e., the actors, groups or individuals, act and interact to protect or to promote their interests stemming from their positions in the status structure of the respective society. There are conflicts that are prompted by widely shared values or ideologies, but also some prompted by narrow interests or outlooks. What is important to mention in this context is that Dahl, and other political sociologists of high caliber, systematically ranked the “pre-industrial” conflicts (based on ethnic, religious, language cleavages) in terms of disruptive potential first (Dahl 1971: 108). Many students of social change and especially of the post-communist transitions have taken up uncritically this point, warning time and again about the risk incurred by multi-ethnic societies and systematically neglecting other types of conflict or the significance of their absence (Elster, Offe, Preuss 1997: 148).

In this view, the ethnic heterogeneity is likely to lead to at least one of two “unpleasant” outcomes: 1) the community would eventually split along ethnic lines; 2) even if the split would eventually be prevented, the strains are so high that they affect the proper workings of the political system (not to mention that this latter outcome is particularly conducive to some authoritarian form of rule - see Dahl 1971: 121). Among the conclusions of this interpretation one could glean that the reason why Poland and Hungary are faring much better than Romania and Bulgaria (not to speak about former Yugoslavia) is because the former are ethnically homogeneous whereas the later are not.

This approach could be criticized on two levels; the first criticism is theoretical in nature. The ranking of conflicts is usually made according to their potential affect on one crucial, dependent variable which is the integrity of the political system.

The importance of other characteristics of political systems is unwarrantedly downplayed.

Secondly, recent developments in many of the East European countries that were initially seen as doomed (Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Croatia) indicate ethnic conflicts and the political disruption that usually come with them are fading into the background. While it is true that ethnic relations between Romanians and Hungarians living in Transylvania, for example, reached a violent climax immediately following the December 1989 revolution, it was an isolated occurrence. Ethnic relations between ethnic Romanians and the Hungarian minority, although not entirely unproblematic, greatly improved. The inclusion of the Hungarian minority party in the center-right government formed after the electoral victory of the opposition in 1996 was unanimously considered a crucial step forward. And one could say that Bulgaria has followed more or less a similar pattern, allowing the Turkish minority party to have a political voice despite obstructionist constitutional provisions. Slovakia and even Croatia have moved recently away from their ethno-nationalistic exclusionary politics of the early 1990s.

It is therefore reasonable to argue that new inclusive measures have positively affected the political environment (if not the proper workings of the government) and, to a significant extent, defused the ethnic tensions in these countries.

Non-ethnic conflicts

There are crucial problems to be addressed intellectually and politically beyond those related to ethnicity, language or even religion. A case for a comprehensive social contract could start from other premises, which do not necessarily hinge on the ethnic diversity of East European polities.

It was apparent from my social life in Romania in the early 1990s that despite a common language, culture and history, people lacked a substantial feeling of togetherness. Moreover, they showed a high degree of mutual distrust (beyond the familiar networks) and perceived others as a competitor, or even as an enemy, in the daily struggle to get a share of scarce social resources. In other words, the cognitive separation between “us” and “them” was widespread, and followed cleavages along ethnic, political or income-related lines. These lines of cleavage increased in number as post-revolutionary time went by.

This was certainly not a biased interpretation of social facts based on fleeting impressions and limited knowledge. At least in the early nineties, there was a widespread awareness of a gap between different social categories such as workers and intellectuals. This awareness prompted a group of Romanian intellectuals and fa-

mous dissidents to set up the Group for Social Dialogue (GSD). From its beginning in December 1989, GSD was considered highly influential because of the moral status of its members. This awareness of social gaps was present even before the violent confrontations of March and June 1990 - confrontations that would show how deep the cleavages were in Romanian society. This societal segmentation was seen by many as boding ill for the completion of a rapid transformation of Romanian society and political institutions. For various reasons, GSD largely failed in its attempt to bring social groups, society and state, government and opposition closer together. Romanian society was instead becoming more polarized, with tensions reaching their climax in June 1990 with clashes between miners and the civil opposition.

When ethnic cleavages could not explain the lack of social cohesion, developments of other kinds were held responsible for it, both at the level of public discourse and in scholarly debates. A lack of social cohesion implied mutual distrust between major political actors and, therefore, the impossibility of comprehensive social pacts. Moreover, these unresolved, unsettled divisions were widely regarded as the cause of the slow progress towards consolidated democracy and market economy and of the general political paralysis.

Elite pacts and social dialogue

In various degrees, social divisions run deep throughout Eastern Europe today just as they did a decade ago. The countries from this part of Europe are differentiated not only according to the pattern of cleavages and conflicts, but also according to the way major political actors interacted to resolve their (and social) disputes and agree on the use and distribution of power and resources in society. Two types of pacts acquired particular attention: the one between different parts of political elites (especially in the passage from one regime to the other) and the one between political elites and interest groups (mainly trade unions).

The pact of elites. Throughout the nineties, some elite theorists focused on the presence or absence of the initial “pact of elites” as an indication of the establishment of democracy and the prospects for democratic “consolidation.”² The Round Table Talks (RTT), for example, were taken as a good indicator that the ensuing

² See, for example, the studies of John Highley and Michael Burton. In a later article, they state: “elite settlements are... one important route to consolidated democratic regimes” (Highley, Burton 1998).

events would remain on the “right” track. Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia were placed in the promising “box,” whereas Romania appeared again as a hopeless country. But the explanation based on the existence of the RTT as a prerequisite of a smooth transition would certainly not work for Bulgaria; the corresponding agreements did not avert the turbulent years which nearly led to the collapse of the Bulgarian economy. As the developments unfolded, the scholars refined their hierarchies. They started speaking of “united” and “disunited” political elites (Highley, Burton 1997) and placed Bulgaria (and Slovakia) alongside Romania.

I share the view that dialogue and mutual accommodation at this level are conducive to integration and improved political performance. The elite pact is not a social pact in a true meaning, but could certainly be seen as a crucial development in this direction. It leaves, however, a number of other important questions unanswered.

The industrial cleavage and tripartite social dialogue. The corporatist arrangement is the classical locus where the notion of “social dialogue” acquired its conceptual meaning. Although the term “corporatism” is too strong to account for the East European interactions between labor, employers’ organizations and state representatives,³ the tripartite arrangements provide a solid ground for assessing the role of “social dialogue” in bringing about social peace.

Some authors are indeed ready to acknowledge that the dialogue between these actors - for a certain period of time and in various degrees in different countries - has come close to achieving its main purpose: maintaining social peace and fostering the feeling that problems are better shared in this way (Cox and Mason 1999: 169). Besides, we are provided with a reliable indicator helping us to differentiate countries where the social dialogue (in this “industrial form” at least) was instrumental in bringing about social peace and some degree of social cohesion from those where the social dialogue was either absent or had no such effect.

There are, however, a number of problems with this approach, some of which are mentioned in Cox and Mason book and refer to Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. There are three notable observations: 1) the tripartite cooperation was especially favored by the social-democratic parties (in some cases, within a larger political strategy to appeal to what is seen as the traditional constituency of left-wing parties); 2) the solution was generally rejected in the first years of transition

³ See the rather bold account of the transformative role of the corporatism in Eastern Europe in Iankova 1998.

when the workers and the trade unions were seen as conservative forces that should be kept away from the decision-making process; 3) this “social dialogue” entered a period of crisis after the mid-1990s in all of these countries (Cox and Mason 1999: 174). Moreover, Cox and Mason state that even when the institutions embodying tripartite agreements were working on a regular basis, their role was, with some notable exceptions, mostly symbolic. Another problem widely mentioned in the literature on labor and interest representation (which will be discussed later) is the lack of representative character of the national “peak” organizations, trade unions and employers’ groups alike.

If these tripartite councils are such inexpensive means to bring about social peace and cohesion, why we do not witness a relatively wide use of them? And why do they seem to be rather neglected in the second half of the nineties? It is obvious that they also have some costs, mainly because they sometimes oppose those measures that are deemed necessary to streamline the economy. Or it might be, as some authors have already noticed, that these types of arrangements are rather remnants of the old order, providing a shelter and a voice for the most non-reformist forces, i.e., the trade unions.⁴ Why would the “reformists” engage in talks with the “anti-reformists,” especially when the former dispose of electoral legitimacy? The dialogue would be largely counter-productive in this case. When at the stake is the recasting of the whole economic structure and when the main actors fight for different arrangements, then little room is left for dialogue and negotiations; permanent conflict will then become the keyword.

There are authors who swim against the current and assert that, in post-communist countries at least, the industrial conflicts are much more consequential than any other type of conflict, including the ethnic one.⁵ But this is not the crucial issue at this point. We clearly need an enlarged picture of the political space in these countries to assess properly the role of these pacts, political agreements and other inclusive measures. To this purpose, I will first answer a crucial question: Who are the major actors involved in these conflictual interactions and how representative are they?

⁴ Smolar (1996) clearly sees the trade unions as the anti-reformist actors by excellence.

⁵ See, for example, Campeanu 1998: 9.

Major political actors and their interactions

Preliminaries: social structure, interest representation and political agency

One way of investigating political conflicts, their potential and the characteristics of the actors involved is by starting from the overall structure of cleavages in a particular country. This approach implies that some political conflicts have social roots, in other words, they are in a way determined by “structural” cleavages. This approach gained prominence after the path-breaking study of Stein Rokkan and S.M. Lipset about “cleavage structures, party systems and voter alignments” in post-war Western Europe (republished in Lipset 1985: 113-185).

The recently published comparative study of five East European countries (Lawson, Römelle, Karasimeonov 1999) explicitly uses this approach to answer the question: how are social cleavages, party constituencies and voter preferences “coupled” in the aftermath of the revolutions? Despite the generous conceptual and theoretical framework (an attempt to apply the Rokkan-Lipset model to these countries), the results are rather disappointing. The model simply does not work. The major finding, not far from the general feelings of the local populations, is that the parties (except those representing minorities) do not have clear and stable constituencies, nor do they reflect cleavages based on “objective” social characteristics.⁶

The common explanation for the parties’ “thin-to-nonexistent ties to a solid social basis” (Barbara Geddes, apud Crawford 1995: 11) is the “social vacuum” (Hall 1995: 86, 89), the amorphous state of the post-communist societies. Some authors linked this state of affairs to the absence of a vibrant civil society, whose weakness would make difficult the “consolidation” of democratic regimes in the area. Other commentators, on the contrary, were ready to see the advantages of this social “paralysis”: it allowed the “reformers” to push ahead with unpopular measures (Hall 1995: 91) without having to face solid and well-articulated social opposition. But this is more like a Pyrric victory with disastrous consequences in the long term. The context is one of “generalized uncertainty as to what one’s interests are and how to best represent them” (Hall 1995: 86). This amorphous state of the society is held responsible for the relative salience of the ethnic cleavage (Heinrich 1999: 149).

⁶ This conclusion was already emerging a few years earlier. See, for example, Elster, Offe, Preuss (1997: 139): “there are strong indications that none of the parties under study (from Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria) are anchored in the divisions in society.” In the words of one Hungarian political scientist, the parties are “floating” over society (Attila Agh, quoted in the same place).

This consideration should go beyond an assessment of the political parties and include other “institutional devices of democratic interest articulation and aggregation,” i.e., trade unions and employers’ groups (Elster, Offe, Preuss 1997: 110). In a synthetic remark, the authors mention a number of studies that “convincingly demonstrated the weakness and the inadequacy of the systems of interest representation” in these societies (ibid.). Neither the parties, the trade unions, nor employers’ organizations are truly representative of social interests.⁷

This general picture presenting the weakness of the political actors and especially their “transitional” character (Elster, Offe, Preuss 1997: 132) should not be availed without much caution. First, because the weakness should be understood in relative, rather than absolute terms. Maybe, when compared to their Western counterparts, the East European parties seem weak. However, if we focus only on the domestic political scene, we can easily notice that they are largely unchallenged and, far from being “transitional,” they have monopolized it and tried by all the legal means – such as, for example, raising the electoral threshold – to prevent the emergence of powerful challengers. Second, the view that parties should represent “social interests” has to be questioned.

There are two issues related to this weakness of the political agency. The first is the low degree of institutionalization of the political agency or, in the words of H.G. Heinrich, the high degree of “personalization” of politics. The other issue is that after a decade of transformations, we are still in a period in which groups and human agencies shape the institutions of the new political order rather than having their behavior shaped by them. As Elster, Offe and Preuss document in their book, East European polities are still at the stage when a “strategical” use of the institutions is widespread: the transition to an exclusive “tactical” use is far from complete. Two years later, another student of the region states bluntly, “the political process is primarily about conflict between political clans” and changes in government appear to be, even in a relatively “advanced” country of the area (Hungary), only “a substitution of one network for another” (Heinrich 1999: 133, 134).

The political battlefields

If the populations were largely absent as direct agents in the processes of transformation, and the structures of representation remained weak throughout the

⁷ For Edmund Mokrzycki (1991), “political actors represent the theoretical interests while real interests lack spokesmen, resulting in discouragement with reforms.”

nineties, then we are left with small elite groups, some with electoral legitimacy, but all with shallow roots in the society at large.

Just as in the old and “established” democracies, there are political parties competing for power in national and local elections. There are also trade unions and “peak” organizations which try, from time to time, to impose their will and affect the process of decision-making at least in socio-economic matters, as well as organized groups of employers facing other “social partners” in tripartite negotiations. The “cast” of the democratic drama is complete, but as the discussion below will underscore, it is still being rehearsed, despite the fact that the public is already seated.

Conflicts, disputes and confrontations are ordinary happenings in any political arena and are indeed propitious for the good workings of a democratic system. There are three directions of inquiry into this matter: first, the interactions and the relative placement of the political parties within the party system; second, the relationship between the parties-in-government and the parties-in-opposition; and, finally, the relationship between the government and both visible and invisible interest groups.

Reformers vs. anti-reformers and the polarization of the party system. In very broad strokes, the whole process of transition in East European countries was painted as one between “liberalizers and their opponents” (Crawford 1995: 11), between those who knew what the future should be like and those who claimed that they knew what the present could bear. The idea of battle, clash, or conflict between opposite camps appears *as central to the entire understanding of the transition processes*. And this point is crucial because the clashes between these major power groups concern the general distribution of wealth and power in society. They concern the establishment of the mechanisms that will affect this distribution (in broad terms, state and market) with momentous consequences for the social structure of the respective society.

Regarding the types of tensions that can fracture the party system, Giovanni Sartori brought to the fore the distinction between “moderate” and “polarized” party systems. The later type, as one commentator put it, “may account for general political immobility and, in some cases, the collapse of democracy” (Daalder 1991: 428). So, we have reasons to abandon the belief that these systemic interactions are completely benign, giving birth only to “cultivated” conflicts. We therefore have to open this area for investigation in order to evaluate correctly the destructive poten-

tial of political confrontation between parties.⁸ And, as the definition above hinted, we should take into account both the disruptive effects themselves and the effects on the efficiency of the whole political system.

These considerations are closely connected with a discussion of the relation between government and opposition. In some party systems, when the ideological distance is significant and little room for compromise remains between two major parties or political blocks, it is safe to presume that the party/parties that win the elections will use the institutions and newly acquired democratic legitimacy to impose its/their will on the defeated opposition. In other words, one should expect a high correlation between the degree of party-system polarization and a systematic disregard (if not mistreatment) of the opposition. If this is still called democracy, it is certainly not the pluralist version, but one which centers itself on the principle of “the sovereign majority.” In a narrow sense, the majority rule is indeed a democratic device to settle the conflicts. But as Dahl has already shown, it could not work properly in the long run (1967: 19).

The party systems of Bulgaria, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia are located by the authors of the *Institutional Design...* “somewhere between moderate and polarized pluralism” (Elster, Offe, Preuss 1997: 141). At the time of publication, one could state that indeed “they do not have the characteristics of a polarized party system” (ibid.). But what is also important are their dynamics, which give reasons to worry. “There is a *strong* tendency toward a centrifugal drive and to becoming polarized, thus making the consolidation of democracy more difficult” (ibid., emphasis added). Hopefully, these countries will not share the fate of historical cases usually taken as models for polarized pluralism, i.e., of Weimar, Fourth French or the Italian Republic. It is equally important, in my view, to be warned about the possibility of a “freezing” of the polarization as something “natural” (see Daalder 1991: 429), a likely outcome in light of the Sartori theory. This will again have considerable consequences on the efficiency (and probably the legitimacy) of the whole political system.

A place for labor. The democratic game empowers and legitimates some specific and very visible political actors, namely the political parties. They are not, however,

⁸ "Given the low level of institutionalisation of political parties and of electoral markets with a high level of electoral availability, the *interactions* of the parties may become a key variable for the stability of the whole political system" (Elster, Ofe, Preuss 1997: 140, emphasis in text).

the only actors involved in conflicts over the general distribution of power in society.

In the case of East European countries, we witness an imbalance between the weight of the political parties and the weight of other interest groups. An imbalance which goes far beyond what is considered normal in a West European democracy for example, for the reasons already stated above. There are authors speaking about the (transformative) “corporatism of Eastern Europe” (Iankova 1998), but it appears that the importance of some elements (the tripartite arrangements, for example) is overemphasized.

David Ost, an American scholar, makes the reader acutely aware of the consequences of this imbalance of power in the political field (Ost 1995). He clearly sides with the labor interests, thus rendering his contribution more a plea than dispassionate research. His point is that conflicts are inevitable, so what matters in the new democracies is how they are “structured” (Ost 1995: 180). In a rather tautological manner, he asserts that “consolidating democracy in post-communist society depends... on structuring conflicts in the most democratic way” (ibid.), i.e., by including and opening the political field to all major groups in a society, especially the labor.

The prerequisites are not, however, conducive to this wishful state of affairs because “labor remains thoroughly unorganized in the political sphere,” and because “liberalizing post-communist governments do not take the demand of the labor very seriously” (Ost 1995: 183). His conclusion is that “democracy is far from being consolidated because of the non-integration of the labor” (Ost 1995: 199). And, of utmost interest for the argument of this paper, he sees the integration of the labor not only as a prerequisite of democratic consolidation, but also as the guarantee that future conflicts will be of a binding, “cultivated” nature. Keeping labor outside of politics will increase the number of conflicts that will undermine democracy (ibid.).

Interests behind the scene. But this is still not the whole story about the major players in post-communist societies. There are groups yielding huge power that do not have the slightest democratic legitimacy. Their lack of visibility is due to their lack of organizational structure. They are often treated analytically as a cohesive group because they have similar types of “capital” stemming from their education, former positions in the socialist economy and a closeness to present-day politicians; they are the “managers” (Szelenyi 1995).

Is this a phenomenon specific to the East European transitions, as Szelenyi has argued? I cannot answer this question here. I pose this question to draw attention

to this largely hidden, but immensely important actor in the general process of the distribution of power and wealth in any society. Discussed in terms of direct political power, this group clearly does not yield such power, nor has any party in Eastern Europe based its electoral success solely on this constituency. Szelenyi argues that the ideology of the “managers,” namely the “monetarism,” and their monopolistic competence make them the leading force in East European societies. Vladimir Pasti (1997), discussing only the Romanian case, is even more forthright in saying that party politics is only window-dressing compared to the huge (material) stakes controlled (if not owned) by this technocratic group.

The communist legacy has afforded the managers a very advantageous position, and this position leads to an emasculation of the central mechanisms of democracy (elections, parliamentary debates, executive accountability etc.), especially because of the huge state assets that had to be “privatized” or redistributed. Stephen Holmes seized the essence of this radically new situation when he pointed to the incapacity of classical liberal arrangements to deal with a problem like “the assignment of first property rights.” What happened, and few commentators have doubts about this, was “a great redistribution behind the scenes” (Holmes 1995: 73), a “privatization without marketization” (Hall 1995: 95).

East European citizens “must stand by and witness nomenklatura privatization - that is, the skillful accumulation of first property rights by individuals who, by hook or by crook, were well placed under the old regime” (Holmes 1995: 73). The theory of democracy remains silent on this issue. “No outcome can be justified by the basic norms of liberal democracy imported from the West” (ibid.). We should expect, however, that this process “gives capitalism a bad name and, thereby, encourages cynicism and apathy - and *rage*” (Hall 1995: 95, emphasis in text). If Holmes is ready to see a powerless democracy when it comes to this matter, Hall instead points to its rapid erosion.

Conflicts as “social glue” and “pillars of democratic market societies”

One of the conclusions of the previous section was that conflicts and systematic dangerous confrontations occur in the very areas where we happily acknowledged the beneficial effects of social or political pacts. Another conclusion is that there are immensely influential actors not involved in political infighting because they are largely invisible, politically speaking. Based on this background, the pacts mentioned in the first section lose their shine and the whole polity, at all levels, seems easy prey to all kinds of conflicts.

Theoretically, at least for those investigating matters of social cohesion as I am in this paper, the intellectual journey should not end here. The picture of a polity fraught with conflicts should not be depressing because, as some authors have argued, the answer to our quest could lie in it.

A positive view on conflicts

Among the many studies that strive to untangle the set of questions pertaining to conflicts, and to explain their interrelation, disruptive potential, and consequences for the political system, there is a theory (or rather a sketch of a theory) that asserts a direct and *positive* relation between (some kinds of) conflicts and a thriving and cohesive democratic polity. According to this theory, conflicts are no longer simply inevitable or something that should be systematically averted or channeled through institutions, but the very “pillars” of a “democratic market society.”⁹ And when there is a visible lack of constitutional patriotism and no other source of community spirit, then the complex alchemy of conflicts brings about a badly needed social cohesion. And there seems to be no need for any explicit social contract.

Albert Hirschman, who “revived” this interpretation quite recently (Hirschman 1995), acknowledges that he took his inspiration from a German social scientist, Helmut Dubiel. Dubiel, in his turn, mentions the contribution of the French theorist of democracy, Marcel Gauchet, who also highlights the beneficial potential of conflicts. This intellectual genealogy makes Hirschman dub this view on conflicts “the Dubiel-Gauchet thesis.”¹⁰

According to Helmut Dubiel, “democratic societies are held together not by the mute concord of their citizens, but by the forms that give shape to their antagonisms” (Dubiel 1998: 209); and “social conflicts produce...the valuable ties that hold modern democratic societies together and provide them with the strength and

⁹ This is the title of a famous article authored by Albert O. Hirschman, “Social Conflicts as Pillars of Democratic Market Society,” first published in *Political Theory*, May 1994, Vol. 22 (2), pp. 203-219, and later reprinted as chapter 20 of Hirschman 1995. The discussion in this section draws heavily on the line of argument provided by Hirschman in this article.

¹⁰ There are many other authors who contributed to this line of thought about conflicts long before the two social scientists rediscovered it. Among others, both Hirschman and Dubiel mention the name of the German sociologist, Georg Simmel, with his chapter on “Streit” from his sociological treatise published in 1908 (see Hirschman 1995: 237, Dubiel 1998: 209). There is no place to discuss the contribution of other modern authors about the close relationship between democracy, conflicts and social cohesion. See for some of the most recent, Mouffe 1999 and Przeworski 1988.

cohesion they need” (apud Hirschman 1995: 235). For Marcel Gauchet, the conflict is an “essential factor of socialization” in democracies and an “eminently efficient producer of integration and cohesion” (ibid.).

It is obvious that this rather provocative interpretation opens new ways for our investigation into the matter of social cohesion in post-communist societies. Seemingly, we now have the answer to our initial interrogation: there is no need for explicit or implicit social contracts or for extended and multilateral social dialogue because “the integration of modern societies is to result quite simply, unbeknownst to its citizens, from their experience of passing through and somehow managing and tending a variety of conflicts” (ibid.). The conflicts themselves provide the cement of society. According to this theory, however, the conflicts have this miraculous effect only in democratic and market-oriented societies. The reason for this is because in a democracy only a certain type of conflict is likely to occur: the “moderate,” “cultivated” or “non-divisive” type.¹¹

The students of post-communist transformations are, however, still uncertain and doubtful that even the most advanced East European societies could be characterized as consolidated democratic societies with a market economy. This makes the use of the Dubiel-Gauchet thesis in the case of East European societies rather problematic. We are not sure that these societies have definitively crossed the crucial threshold to establishing solid, permanent and unquestionable institutions which can deal with and settle conflicts.

The possibility of “exceptional” or “divisive” issues emerging in these countries should not be ruled out, and it is the job of the researcher to locate the relevant area of conflicts and decide upon their nature. If this task is completed, we will be able to assess, by the same token, the general level of democratization in these countries. In so far as the assessments made in the previous section are correct and the relationship suggested by Hirschman holds true, then we should conclude that democratic consolidation is not yet achieved in any of the countries in Eastern Europe.

Specificity of conflicts in transitional times

Despite all these theoretical efforts, we should acknowledge that it is quite difficult to map out, *in abstracto*, all the relevant conflicts, and especially to provide reliable universal criteria to distinguish between “severe” and “moderate” conflicts. Maybe, as Hirschman argues in the end of his article, those conflicts that seem to us

¹¹ The terms belong respectively to Robert A. Dahl, Helmut Dubiel and Albert O. Hirschman.

exceptional, dangerous and nondivisible are probably simply unfamiliar. In many cases, and especially in new political orders (such as the political orders of post-communism), the main actors and contenders lack previous experience to handle them in an adequate way. To the contrary, in the long established democracies, what has once appeared as highly divisive is nowadays treated with calm and with the solution always in sight. These societies now have a long tradition of managing a wide range of conflicts and this permanent interaction makes the “Gauchet-Dubiel thesis” hold true in their case.

Probably many “unhappy” outcomes of the conflicts that emerged at the beginning of the transition processes were mainly due to the radical novelty of the contentious issues and to the lack of experience of the new political actors. Only the recurrent experience of these conflicts, Hirschman concludes, will arm the actors with the knowledge and practical abilities to contain their disruptive potential (1995: 248). The notion of “democratic learning” acquires a new meaning in this context.

It is also true that the number of “unfamiliar” conflicts seems to be increasing even in long-established democracies. It might be the case that the balance of moderate and extreme positions among average citizens and leaders, the pattern of cleavages, the importance of the issue, and the institutional framework¹² are of no help in dealing with atypical conflicts. For example, when the community is on the brink of collapse or civil war. Still, is there any hope for a safe way out from this deadlock? Hirschman suggests where a positive answer could lie: in the human agency itself, in the very and scientifically intractable factor that is essentially at the origin of the social conflicts. “What is actually required to make progress with the novel problems a society encounters on its road is political entrepreneurship, imagination, patience there, impatience there, and other varieties of *virtu* and *fortuna*” (ibid.).

It is a commonplace remark that not all the conflicts are binding people together, and therefore we should be aware of their latent destructive potentials. The danger looms even bigger in the cases where the community is not yet held together by some institutional framework or when, for different reasons, this framework is brought into question (which was the case of East European countries at the end of communism). This is why the transformations in Eastern Europe pose a double

¹² These are the criteria to help identify the potential of conflicts in a model put forward by Robert Dahl (1967: 279-281)

challenge to the researcher investigating the array and the nature of conflicts: first, to see how many of them are still “pre-politic,” i.e., are taking place outside any institutional framework or are beyond the shape of this framework. And second, to see to what extent glue or solvent spreads the conflicts taking place inside the already agreed-upon framework. In the “long-established” democracies, not only some institutional arrangements exist, but they greatly influence and sometimes determine the potential for conflict at any moment. As I tried to show in this paper, this is only partially true in the East European countries.

Conclusions

The survey of the issues pertaining to pacts, conflicts and social cohesion in East European countries allows the following conclusions to be drawn.

1. Conflict is part and parcel of any political system. It is a complex and multifarious reality that, unfortunately, has so far gained only a limited empirical treatment in relation to violence or ethnic cleavages. As I tried to underline in my approach, these are not the only dimensions worth investigating. Even when violence is absent or the collapse of the system is not looming over, the presence and the nature of some conflicts may have disruptive consequences seriously affecting the cohesiveness of the community or the good operation of the political mechanisms and institutions.

2. The absence of conflict could sometimes also be an indication that the relationship between (democratic) institutions and the society at large is functionally perturbed.

3. The establishment of a working set of democratic institutions is not an immediate guarantee that all the conflicts occurring within their framework will be “cultivated, moderate,” or leading to more social cohesion. On the contrary, if it is not yet visible in Eastern Europe, the case of democratic institutions “pinning” major social and political conflicts to their foundations is a reality in other polities. This possibility should not be completely ruled out for the countries under investigation, a case in which the inherent tensions will require even more political craftsmanship than is presently available.

4. The institutional threshold has not been crossed in any of the East European countries. Institutions are still used in political conflicts rather than used to provide a stable framework (of arbitration and reference) for them. This fact means that any “normal” conflict could have a spillover effect with highly unpredictable conse-

quences for the basic rules and institutions. By this very fact, the stakes of the conflicts could be surprisingly high.

5. I could not find compelling evidence that East European societies generate only conflicts with beneficial effects in terms of efficiency and social cohesiveness. I found, however, that democracy is an arena of conflicts (and dialogue) and therefore the only place where people can develop interlocking interests and endeavors.

6. The bulk of the literature quoted in this paper indicates a deeper trend: a slow and barely visible separation taking place between the upper and the lower layers of East European societies. “The one division that seems to exist everywhere (in Eastern Europe), unambiguously, and that appears to be assuming the guise of a true cleavage, is that between the *minority* who are doing well in the post-communist struggle... and the *majority* who are doing poorly” (Lawson 1999: 32, emphasis in text). Another author, while referring only to the Polish case, makes a statement that could apply to the entire region: “a dual economy and a dual society are emerging with strong antagonisms within occupational groups along the fault line public/private” (Heinrich 1999: 133).

We should return to Dahl’s classical analysis of conflict to understand the lack of violence and the delusive stability that most of these countries seem to enjoy: “evidence that political disagreements are becoming severe is an increase in threats of actual violence, suppression of opponents, civil war, secession, disloyalty, or *a marked increase in demoralization, apathy, indifference, or alienation*” (Dahl 1967: 279, emphasis added). If there is no violence, there are instead many signs of indifference and demoralization. This is certainly a reliable indication that a massive, although silent, exit from the polity has prematurely begun.

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