

## Fault Lines of Political Culture in Europe: Vibrant Legacies from the Past

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### Abstract

For some time, scholars have argued that Western and Eastern Europe differ in terms of the political culture of their unified political communities. Since all the available evidence indicates that political culture is crucial to the economic performance and political stability of individual states, it is important to detect the drivers behind the basic beliefs of citizens, two and a half decades after the fall of communism. The Relevant World Values Survey and the European Values Survey reports repeatedly confirmed that whilst the support for democracy is strong among the citizens of the former communist Eastern Europe, their belief in the vital components of a democratic political culture is weak. It could be argued that some post-communist countries have been less successful in building the “moral infrastructure of democracy” due to the resilient democratic values deficit, based partially upon the political and economic attitudes from the past. In a separate section of this chapter, the results of a survey conducted on a group of students from the Republic of Macedonia are presented and their replies on the dichotomy between autocratic and democratic values are analyzed. By assessing the opinions of the students who had not been born when communism was still alive, it has been concluded that a substantial cultural shift will have to take place if the current system of formal democracy is to be replaced by a more effective one.

**Keywords:** political culture, post-communism, democracy, autocracy, democratic values

## Introduction

Probably many would agree with Amartya Sen that the most important thing that happened in the twentieth century was the emergence of democracy as the “preeminently acceptable form of government” (Sen, 1993, 1). During the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and with the rise of fascism and communism, democracy was not globally accepted as being the best of political systems; however, in the past few decades the situation has radically changed (Inglehart, 2003, p. 52). At face value, various polls have been continuously confirming that the support for democracy is overwhelming throughout the world. However, when breaking down the results it is clear that many respondents support democracy without supporting certain elements of a democratic political culture.

In this regard, two distinctive groups very frequently oppose each other in the polls: “genuine” democrats as opposed to the so-called “instrumental” democrats (Jamal, Tessler, 2012, p. 12). The dilemma concerning the latter is whether they want to appear to be “politically correct” with regard to a globally “fashionable” word or maybe they have a unique understanding of the term of democracy (Ibid, 1). Strangely enough, formal support for democracy is strong even in one-party states, such as Vietnam where one recent poll finds that 68% of the people prefer democracy to its autocratic alternative despite the fact that they have been living for decades in a non-representative political system (Dalton, Shin, 2011, 17).

Schedler and Sarsfield are correct in observing that the problem with the near universal acceptance of democracy does not mean that people are insincere in their answers, but rather that their alleged preferences for democracy: “may be devoid of any concrete content”. Their empirical research strongly confirms that: “democrats with adjectives” are supportive of democracy in the abstract, but opposed to the basic principles of liberal democracy in particular (Schedler, Sarsfield, 2004, pp. 1-2).

## Political Culture and Democracy

During the global processes of modernization, cultures converge, but it is obvious that something resembling a uniform world culture does not exist. Some authors rightly claim that even the common regional cultures are politically constructed, referring to the prime example of the European Union as a political unit whose members possess rather distinct national cultures (Blondel, Inoguchi, 2006, 7-9). Furthermore, strong local specifics do not develop in isolation, as the history of each nation and the wider region in which nations belong, generate specific legacies.

The relationship between democracy and political culture has always been complex and challenging, especially in those countries which have seen more than one ideological or political system in their history. In principle, three groups of authors coalesce around the drivers of popular support for democracy debating about the importance of economic factors, political performance and the role of the political culture (Pop-Eleches, Tucker, Ch. 4, 2011, pp.1-2). For democracy to emerge, as Klingemann et al. argue, having favorable internal or external structural conditions is not enough (Klingemann et al.2006, p. 2). In this regard, the seminal work of Almond and Verba, who have concluded that democracy can survive only if supported by a specific political culture, stands as the basic point of departure (Almond, Verba, 1963). Studying political culture and the “democratic belief system” is a *condicio sine qua non* if one is to understand democracy-building process in its entirety (Klingemann et al. 2006, p. 8).

An attempt to identify the sources of democratization would lead us to the key contribution of Inglehart about the mass orientations of the people as “powerful predictors” of the level of democracy (Inglehart, Welzel, 2010, 552). Since 1981, all reports of the World Values Survey and the European Values Survey have clearly displayed cultural differences between two groups of countries: less developed countries produce one set of values termed traditional or survivalist, centered on order, economic security and conformity, while the post-industrial societies produce another set of values, generally nominated as the post-materialist component with an emphasis on self-expression, participation, trust and tolerance. What is more important, these surveys confirm the bond between the post-material values and democracy on the one side and the survival values dimension witnessed in less democratic societies on the other (Ibid., p. 554).

### **Strength of History and Formal Institutions**

Once we overcome the dilemma about the relevance of the peoples’ attitudes and values, the real question is about the different ways in which culture influences social development (Sen, 2002, p. 1). A century and a half ago, traditional modernists were right in believing that socioeconomic development brought about major political and cultural changes; nowadays the school of revised modernization theory demonstrates even more forcefully that the basic values and beliefs to be found in advanced societies are drastically different from those less developed ones (Inglehart, Welzel, 2005, p. 1).

The introduction of democracy in the former communist countries differed substantially from the same processes in the rest of the world. A few years ago, arguing about the end of the transitional paradigm Carothers dismissed its core assumption

that all countries emerging from dictatorships are in transition towards democracy, by default (Carothers, 2002, p. 6). Since, it became obvious that despite the high expectations of the ordinary people and the predictions of the pundits, liberal democracy has not gained ground in all of the post-communist countries after 1989.

In the early years of post-communism the so-called modernist approaches (Morse, 2004) dominated the analyses of the transition of the post-communist states, assuming that the transfer of Western models and institutions is a universal formula for building modern democracies. A key tenet of the modernization theory explains that economic, social and political changes are closely interlinked and when economic changes occur, social and political changes will simply follow (Blondel, Inoguchi, 2006, p. 4). But, in that context, despite some level of convergence, the central political values and parochial dimension of local cultures persist, anchored in characteristic local history” (Pye in *ibid.*, p. 7). As time went by, the historical and contextual approach of analyzing the transition gained prominence, emphasizing the importance of distinct historical legacies (Blokker, 2005, p. 505).

Broadly speaking, two schools of thought have offered their interpretation on democratic consolidation in the formerly non-democratic states. Institutionalists argue that establishing a network of formal political institutions is enough to serve the cause, while scholars of political culture insist that something more than institutions is required (Bonavides, 2011, p. 14). The same dichotomy, only, designated differently is the classification between fast-moving and slow-moving institutions. The former assume benefits from the rapid establishment of new political institutions; the latter presupposes the gradual introduction of new social norms and values. In this model, slow-moving institutions are better positioned to influence fast-moving ones (Roland, 2004, p. 12). According to many scholars the second approach is the most appropriate way to explain the causal link between values and democracy in post-communist societies (Bonavides, p. 16).

### **Impact of Communist Legacy in Transition**

According to Sztompka “two surprises” have demarcated the transition from communism to formal democracy. First, nobody had anticipated the coming tectonic historical changes, and second, formal democracy has not been transformed into real democracy in all of the post-communist countries (Sztompka, 1993, pp. 85-86). Sztompka opines that the main reason for this unexpected outcome has been the mentality of post-communist people which stands in the way of democratic transition or what he broadly named as their “civilizational incompetence” (*Ibid.*, p. 87). Analyzing four sub-groups of values and norms as prerequisites for modern

transformation, Sztopka concluded that decades of socialism are still effectively preventing the emergence of civilizational competence, especially, in the peripheral societies of Eastern and Central Europe (Ibid., p. 89).

Along similar lines, Bernik has offered a conceptual explanation as to why the legacy from communism is inhibiting the emergence of democratic processes in the transitional countries. By extensively citing Zupanov he has juxtaposed socialism's egalitarian syndrome in the economic sphere against authoritarianism in the political field, both of which have survived long after major changes in the political system happened (Bernik, 2000, pp. 1-2). Both Sztopka and Zupanov are resolute that the once dominant cultural patterns of socialism are incompatible with the demands for modernization of these societies after the ideological paradigm shift (Ibid., p. 4). Close scrutiny of the particular post-communist syndrome by Klicperova-Baker displays some components of the same phenomenon such as that of suppressed individuality, a lack of initiative and personal responsibility, hopelessness, passivity and pessimism. Although the syndrome could not be generalized over the whole population it is certain that a specific mental legacy from the past is still accompanying citizens in post-communist societies (Klicperova-Baker, 1999, pp. 6-7).

The robust evidence from the Relevant World Values Survey and the European Values Survey indicate that post-communist citizens are generally less supportive of democratic forms of government and hold political, economic and social opinions that differ systematically from those people who have not experienced communism (Pop-Eleches, Tucker, Ch. 1, 2011, p. 3). Or, as Klingemann *et. al.*, put it, in the countries situated more to the East, the share of people with the autocratic views is higher, while the share of people with the pro-democratic attitudes is lower (Klingemann et al., 2006, p. 13).

Inglehart and Welzel offered precise data that all former communist countries rank relatively low on the survival/self-expression scale. According to them, communist ideology obviously left a very strong imprint over the value system of the people and in this regard two examples, out of many, hold remarkable explanatory power. Two decades after the fall of communism, people from the former East Germany still share similar cultural traits with those citizens in other former communist states, but, at the same time are different from their compatriots from West Germany. A second example concerns the values system of the PR China's citizens which falls within the "broad communist influenced zone", but, deviates from neighboring countries and regions (Inglehart, Welzel, 2005, p. 64).

## Survey: Sample, Results and Discussion

The current survey was performed during 2015 and 2016 with 120 university students of law and political sciences, aged 18-25 years, with 64 females and 56 males. Most of them reside in the capital Skopje or in cities with more than of 5,000 inhabitants (97), the remaining 23 live in communities with less than of 5,000 inhabitants. The predominant number (108) were coming from families with above the national average income per capita in the Republic of Macedonia. Only 12 students were below that threshold. The majority of the students were ethnic Macedonians (81), with 23 ethnic Albanians and 16 from other smaller ethnic communities (Table 11).

The questionnaire (Figure 1) consisted of 10 questions arranged around the categories of political authoritarianism, economic egalitarianism and the relationship between an individual and the state. Bearing in mind that the prime goal of the survey was to reveal the attitudes of students to elements of a democratic political culture. Direct questions about their support for democracy as a political system were not posed, by design.

Skepticism towards democracy is evident since a huge percentage of the students (66 per cent) agreed with the description of a democratic political system to be too complicated; costly and inefficient (Table 2). A high 68 per cent would prefer a strong leader over parliament and elections as a constitutive element of each democracy (Table 3). Even one typically undemocratic undertaking, such as, reducing the number of the political parties, is backed by 45 per cent of the respondents (Table 5). Question 6 was especially revealing about the misunderstanding at the very core of a democratic political system which presupposes active citizens' activity and political participation, before, but, once the elections are over, as well: namely, 57 per cent of the respondents agree that the legitimately elected government should govern without being obstructed during its term of office, either by the citizens or by the political opposition (Table 6). Questions 1 and 4 were indicative of the hierarchy of values of the responders: 68 per cent of them consider the interests of the state as more important than the interests of the citizens. Consequently, it was not a surprise that 63 per cent of respondents were convinced that "too much democracy" might lead to anarchy and endanger the country's stability (Table 1 and 4).

In the answers given to the cluster of questions connected with economic egalitarianism, it is obvious that the prime values of socialism still linger. Students were almost equally divided (47/48 per cent) between individual efforts and the support by the state as a precondition for their personal advancement (Table 7). A

similar divide was exposed in the responses to the question about the best management of the economic domain, associated with the very high number of students (35 per cent) who were undecided about one of the key tenets of the free market economy (Table 8). Economic egalitarianism was sustained by almost half of the students (48 per cent) who replied that regardless of their concrete job performance employees should receive similar salaries (Table 10). Within this group of questions, only the answers on question 9 would require any additional clarification: when 65 per cent of the respondents are supportive of an undemocratic government if it resolves their economic problems, it is not only a conclusive sign of their undemocratic orientation, but also, an indication of desperate nation-wide living conditions (Table 9).

Though virtually all analyses of the political culture are embedded on the level of the state, the existence of sub-cultures below state level is recognized, especially in the multi-ethnic political communities (Blondel, Inoguchi, 2006, p. 13). More than a decade ago scholars advised on countering the “monocultural” reading of the nation’s past (Sen, 2002, p. 6). Bearing in mind that the Republic of Macedonia is not an ethnically and religiously homogeneous society, distinctive cultural influences by smaller ethnic communities should not be dismissed. However, answers within all of the four categories of respondents, including the students’ ethnicity, do not show any statistically significant deviation from the main framework of the survey’s results.

## Conclusion

The analyses presented in this article are based on a limited set of data from a category of people in one society which is certainly not enough to provide for conclusive answers on the subject. One study revealed that what matters from the past is not only the duration of the exposure to communist indoctrination, but, the subtype or rigidity of the system, as well (Pop-Eleches, Tucker, 2012, p. 15). In our sample we miss both elements as the respondents’ age prevented them from having a personal experience of lived in communism. Nevertheless, the main findings are self-evident: the students’ attitudes on all ten questions were predominantly within the materialist/survival zone characteristic of the former undemocratic system.

Interestingly, the research done in post-industrial societies indicates that young people express more post-materialist values than older ones, but that is not the case with young people in those countries with insignificant or no economic growth at all (Inglehart, Welzel, 2005, p. 97). The anemic transitional performance of the Macedonian economy coupled with the lingering legacies of the past had certainly shaped the context conducive for the answers given by the students in our survey.

The scientific mainstream holds that successful democratization depends not only upon the visions of the political elites, but, on the behavioral preferences of the ordinary citizens (Tessler, Gao, 2009, p. 197). Although this premise has been known since the Max Weber's emphasis on the importance of culture in explaining institutional and economic change (in Ronald, 2004, 13), it would be a gross exaggeration to claim that cultural values have a potential to offer an all-embracing explanation as to why democracy in certain countries fails (Granato, Inglehart, Leblang, 1996, p. 694). A similar viewpoint is shared even by some authors who recognize the impact of the cultural factors over democracy, but argue that their supposed effects are substantially overstated (Jackman, Miller, 1996, p. 633). However, the vast pool of data on human attitudes and preferences comprised in the World Values Survey and the European Values Survey has unambiguously positioned political culture as a vital prerequisite for a mature democracy. Two and a half decades after the fall of communism the imprint of socialist values and attitudes is still alive in some of the former communist states and it is right there that the rift between the winners and losers in democratic transition is situated.

Bearing this in mind, any forecast based on the survey's results does not bode well for the future course of a democratic political culture in the Republic of Macedonia. It is obvious that fundamental cultural modifications in the country are possible only as a generational venture. A quarter of century after the former system ended the fault lines of political culture between the Republic of Macedonia and the so-called winners of the post-communist transition are still tangible. Cultural templates from the past have something to say about that.

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Figure 1

Questionnaire

**1. The interests of the state should be prioritized over the interests of the citizens**

STRONGLY AGREE    AGREE    STRONGLY DISAGREE    DISAGREE    DON'T KNOW

**2. Democracy as a political system is too complicated, costly and inefficient**

STRONGLY AGREE    AGREE    STRONGLY DISAGREE    DISAGREE    DON'T KNOW

**3. It is good to have a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections**

STRONGLY AGREE    AGREE    STRONGLY DISAGREE    DISAGREE    DON'T KNOW

**4. Too much democracy might lead to anarchy thus endangering the country's stability**

STRONGLY AGREE    AGREE    STRONGLY DISAGREE    DISAGREE    DON'T KNOW

**5. Whether the number of political parties in a country should be reduced by the law, in order to strengthen democracy**

STRONGLY AGREE    AGREE    STRONGLY DISAGREE    DISAGREE    DON'T KNOW

**6. Legitimately elected government should govern without obstructions by the citizens or political opposition**

STRONGLY AGREE    AGREE    STRONGLY DISAGREE    DISAGREE    DON'T KNOW

**7. What should be more important for your personal advancement: your individual effort or support by the state**

INDIVIDUAL EFFORT                      SUPPORT BY THE STATE                      DON'T KNOW

**8. Economy should be managed more successfully**

BY THE STATE    BY THE PRIVATE BUSINESSES    BY THE STATE AND THE PRIVATE  
 BUSINESSES COMBINED    DON'T KNOW

**9. I would not mind a non-democratic government if it resolves economic problems**

STRONGLY AGREE    AGREE    STRONGLY DISAGREE    DISAGREE    DON'T KNOW

**10. Regardless of their concrete job performance all employees should receive similar salaries**

STRONGLY AGREE    AGREE    STRONGLY DISAGREE    DISAGREE    DON'T KNOW

Table 1

The interests of the state should be prioritized over the interests of the citizens		
Strongly agree	34	28.3%
Agree	48	40%
Strongly disagree	17	14.2%
Disagree	16	13.3%
Don't know	5	4.2%

Table 2

Democracy as a political system is too complicated, costly and inefficient		
Strongly agree	33	28%
Agree	46	38%
Strongly disagree	23	19%
Disagree	17	14%
Don't know	1	1%

Table 3

It is good to have a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections		
Strongly agree	38	32%
Agree	43	36%
Strongly disagree	22	18%
Disagree	17	14%
Don't know	0	0%

Table 4

Too much democracy might lead to anarchy thus endangering the country's stability		
Strongly agree	36	30%
Agree	40	33%
Strongly disagree	13	11%
Disagree	22	18%
Don't know	9	8

Table 5

Whether the number of political parties in a country should be reduced by the law, in order to strengthen democracy		
Strongly agree	20	17%
Agree	34	28%
Strongly disagree	17	14%
Disagree	33	28%
Don't know	16	13%

Table 6

Legitimately elected government should govern without obstructions by the citizens or political opposition		
Strongly agree	29	24%
Agree	39	33%
Strongly disagree	22	18%
Disagree	28	23%
Don't know	2	2%

Table 7

What should be more important for your personal advancement: your individual effort or support by the state		
Individual effort	56	47%
Support by the state	58	48%
Don't know	6	5%

Table 8

Economy should be managed more successfully		
By the state	39	33%
By the private businesses	34	28%
By the state and the private businesses combined	42	35%
Don't know	5	4%

Table 9

I would not mind a non-democratic government if it resolves economic problems		
Strongly agree	36	30%
Agree	42	35%
Strongly disagree	12	10%
Disagree	22	18%
Don't know	8	7%

Table 10

Regardless of their concrete job performance all employees should receive similar salaries		
Strongly agree	24	20%
Agree	34	28%
Strongly disagree	18	15%
Disagree	27	23%
Don't know	17	14%

Table 11

Structure of respondents		Examinees	Percentage
Gender	Male	56	47%
	Female	64	53%
Total		120	100%
Residence	Urban areas	97	81%
	Rural areas	23	19%
Total		120	100%
Income level	Above national average	108	90%
	Below national average	12	10%
Total		120	100%
Ethnicity	Ethnic Macedonians	81	68%
	Ethnic Albanians	23	19%
	Others	16	13%
Total		120	100%