

# The Typology and Novelty of Eastern European Revolutions

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*“Spaces for democratic practices are constituted in both established and nascent democracies, as well as under modern and post-modern tyrannies.”*  
*(J. C. Goldfarb)*

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## Misunderstanding the Eastern European Revolutions

WHETHER THE systemic political changes which occurred in Eastern Europe in 1989–1991 meet the attributes of revolutions has been pre-occupying political scientists, sociologists and historians for a long time. Retrospectively, one can easily support the view that the systemic political changes in Eastern Europe occurred in 1989–1991 had a genuine revolutionary character as they have revolutionized the entire state system and the whole subsystem of international relations in Eastern Europe. Indeed, they were *triple rejection revolutions*: *national* revolutions rejecting the external hegemonic power (the Soviet Union), *political* revolutions rejecting the dictatorial regimes in each Eastern European country, and *social* revolutions rejecting the socialist system of organization of the society as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

However, at the time of their occurrence, the problem was that the features of the Eastern European revolutions sat badly with almost all the definitions of the concept of revolution put forward before 1989. Particularly problematic was the issue of violence, considered a fundamental characteristic of the revolution by the ma-

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majority of the relevant authors who analyzed the phenomenon before 1989 (Karl Marx,<sup>2</sup> Theda Skocpol,<sup>3</sup> Ted Robert Gurr,<sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt,<sup>5</sup> Chalmers Johnson,<sup>6</sup> Crane Brinton,<sup>7</sup> Samuel Huntington,<sup>8</sup> Ekkart Zimmermann,<sup>9</sup> but not Charles Tilly), but which was not present in the Eastern European revolutions, except for Romania. Historian and political scientist Charles Tilly is the only theorist from before 1989 who accepted the possibility of non-violent revolution. He argues that whenever “multiple sovereignties” coexist, i.e. there are groups with alternative and exclusive claims to government control, there is a *revolutionary situation*. But in order to get a *revolutionary result*, “a significant segment of the population” has to support these claims. For Tilly, a revolution “begins when a government previously under the control of a single, sovereign polity becomes the object of effective, competing, mutually exclusive claims from two or more separate polities” and it “ends when a single polity—by no means necessarily the same one—regains control over the government.” Although reducing the concept to its strictly political dimension—the replacement of a group of power holders by another group<sup>10</sup>—Tilly implicitly admits the possibility of non-violent revolutions, and this is precisely his major contribution to the understanding of the non-violent character of most Eastern European revolutions.

After 1989, various authors have tried to interpret Eastern European revolutions in most different formulae, but most of them failed to evince the victorious strategy followed by civil society to reach the denouement of 1989. Symptomatic for the notional and theoretical confusion which prevailed in Western scholarship as far as the concept of revolution is concerned when the Eastern European revolutions took place remains their labelling by the famous British essayist Timothy Garton Ash as “refolutions.”<sup>11</sup> The hybrid nature of the term, trying to make sense of the combination of reform strategies with revolutionary goals, did nothing but increase the confusion about the nature and significance of this fundamental turning point in European and world history at the end of the twentieth century.

Even when the Eastern European systemic political changes throughout 1989–1991 were labelled revolutions, most authors failed to capture the contribution through which these revolutions inserted themselves into universality. Referring to the “incomplete” nature of the Eastern European revolutions, mainly due to their peaceful and non-violent character, Ernst Nolte spoke about the “conservative revolution,” which he considered to be a complement to the European civil war launched by the 1917 Bolshevik revolution. Ralf Dahrendorf put forward the term “liberal revolution” to emphasize the triumph of the open society in Central and Eastern Europe. Underlying the rift over the revolutionary model of 1789 and accepting the default equivalence of socialism with a failed form of modernization, Agnes Heller and Ferenc Feher spoke of “post-modern revolution.” In their view, the post-modern nature of the Eastern European rev-

olutions is given by the following features: unlike earlier European revolutions, the Eastern European revolutions reversed modern, not pre-modern regimes; they led Central and Eastern Europe into the formation and expansion of a post-modern *cosmopolis*, in order to make modernity viable; they allowed the coexistence of processes which recall the pre-modern meaning of the revolution, that of the return to a previous state of affairs; and they incorporated in their policy the lessons learned from “negative experiences of previous revolutions, ending the era of the great revolutions and great histories of modernity.”

Starting from the central concept of modernity and referring to the mimetic and restoration trends of Eastern European revolutions which, in turn, point to the semantics of the pre-modern concept of revolution, Jürgen Habermas interpreted the 1989 events as an ‘imitative revolution.’<sup>12</sup> Applying such a label, Habermas failed to see precisely the essence of the innovative elements of Eastern European revolutions—the concept of “self-limiting revolution,” associated with the idea of self-institutionalization and self-emancipation of civil society. The fact is all the more paradoxical since Habermas is the author of a well articulated concept regarding civil society. According to him, civil society includes all institutions and forms of association involving communication for their reproduction, which are based on processes of social integration. Central to his vision of civil society is the concept of life-world, which has three structural components—culture, society and personality—and means the reservoir of implicitly known traditions, manifested through language and culture by individuals in their everyday life. Habermas’s systemic-relational model is tripartite: civil society–state–economy. He denounces as potentially generating the “loss of freedom” the penetration of “life-world”—which he refers to also as reification or colonization—by the logic of the economic and political subsystems.

## The Novelty of Eastern European Revolutions

**T**HE QUINTESSENCE of the novelty of the revolutions of Eastern Europe is represented by the concept of “self-limiting revolution.” Theorized by the Central European dissidents, the concept was influenced by Antonio Gramsci’s idea of civil society. The emphasis in Gramsci’s outlook on the civil society is put on the necessity to first defeat the cultural hegemony before attempting to conquer the political power.<sup>13</sup> This type of outlook emphasised the cultural means of civil society as opposed to the administrative means used by the state. Implemented for the first time by the Polish civil society, the “self-limiting revolution” is the strategy through which Central European civil society initiated the “bottom up” reform of communism and imposed itself as one of the significant factors which ultimately contributed to its collapse.

Offering the option of a self-democratizing society, the Central European concept of civil society points to a notion relating to democracy which implies a broader reference than state institutions, and which can be adequately understood as the end rather than as mere means. The actions of Solidarity demonstrated the practical possibility to negotiate the postponement of obtaining economic and political benefits in exchange for the institutionalization of those dimensions of civil society able to assure a greater societal impact. In the early days of Solidarity, the workers on strike were willing to give up wage increases in exchange for acquiring the right of free association and other civil rights. And in 1989, representatives of the Solidarity in the Round Table negotiations considered essential the legalization of trade unions, accepting with great difficulty political representation in Parliament. A fundamental condition for this exemplary behaviour was the clear conscience of the moral superiority of a powerless ethics over an immoral authority.

## The Typology of Eastern European Revolutions

**T**HE NOTION of revolution as “a form of unconstitutional political change, involving both elite and masses, and which results in a change of the type of regime,”<sup>14</sup> has the advantage of capturing the appropriate combination (in varying proportions) of popular protest and negotiations among elites, in other words, the “revolution from below” (involvement of the masses) and “revolution from above” (involving elites) that characterized the Eastern European revolutions.<sup>15</sup> However, we do not endorse the typology of political change advanced by the author of this definition, who reserves the attribute of “transition” only for the political change which is unconstitutional, negotiated, restricted to the elite and which has as a result a change of regime and, therefore, only for some cases of systemic political change in Eastern Europe.<sup>16</sup>

Instead, we propose a typology that preserves the traditional distinctions of *constitutional/unconstitutional* and *negotiated/un-negotiated* change, and the involvement of *masses/elites*, respectively, but adds to the *synchronous* perspective the *diachronic* one, making a fundamental distinction between *the long and short term of the transition*.

Indeed, prior to 1989, the previous major crises in Eastern Europe put forward three strategies of political change: the “revolution from below”—the GDR workers’ uprising (1953) and the Hungarian Revolution (1956); the “revolution from above”—the de-Stalinization (1956), the “Prague Spring” (1968) and the “Croat Spring” (1971); and, against the background of the failure of the two previous strategies, the “self-limiting revolution”—the Solidarity movement (1980–1981).

During the 1989 revolutions the three strategies merged, but the “self-limiting revolution” strategy was especially instrumental in preparing the ground for the 1989 “negotiated revolutions” in Central Europe.

A comparative approach to Eastern European revolutions from a dual long and short term perspective can and should take into account several key variables, including: tendencies to reform the communist system prior to its collapse; earlier crises prior to the system’s collapse; the development of civil society; the involvement of the elites and/or the masses in the political transition process; whether the transition was negotiated or non-negotiated, peaceful or violent, top down or bottom up; the fate of the Communist Party; the first free elections; the presence of former dissidents in the new power structures; the manner in which the constitutional framework was changed; and the ways of abandoning communism.

A summary illustration of our outlook on Eastern European revolutions typology from the dual perspective of long and short term transition is reflected in the table (pp. 112–114).

Although the “big star” of the transition has been the political society and not the civil society, focusing on the concept of civil society has the advantage of highlighting the fact that some of the dissidents who were at the forefront of the public arena before 1989 took over most key positions in the state after the revolution in Central Europe, including at the level of heads of states (Václav Havel, Lech Wałęsa, Zhelyu Zhelev, Sali Berisha) and heads of governments (Tadeuzs Mazowiecki, József Antall). Thus, the revolutionary spirit and ethos of 1989 lived on in Europe and on the international stage for another decade or so and the East European civil society, through an emphasis on human rights, inserted itself into globalization.

## **“Self-limiting Revolution”: A Strategy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

**F**AR FROM belonging exclusively to recent history, the “self-limiting revolution” is a concept and practice viable not only for the post-communist realities, but for the era of globalization, too. The notion of “self-limiting revolution” has a double added value—normative and strategic. From the normative point of view, it helps to introduce a normative perception of political change in accordance with which democracy is seen as a goal rather than a tool. From a strategic standpoint, it does provide a practical tool for expanding the frontiers of liberty in societies marked by democratic deficits, seeking to actually annihilate of the opposition and to deprive civil society of its instruments

of self-organization and self-defence, which would amount to a new form of dictatorship—“soft” and dressed in “democratic clothes,” but no less treacherous. The concept of dictatorship is understood here in its classic definition, put forward by Franz Neumann: “the rule of a person or group of persons who arrogate to themselves and monopolize power in the state, exercising it without constraint.”<sup>17</sup>

Current mass society favours only the instrumental aspect of democracy that provides through elections a procedural, legal legitimacy to those elected. The sociological aspect of legitimacy, which requires keeping open the social channels of communication between the rulers and the ruled is often overlooked or deliberately obscured.

The Eastern European concept of civil society offers not only the prospect of bringing to life that legitimacy, but also a possible site for reconciliation of economic liberalism with political democracy, taking into account the fact that both the free market and the democratic state can become truly strong only if there is a strong civil society. The theory and practice of “self-limiting revolution” offers the prospect of implementing a major goal of political change and citizenship: the censorship of all forms of corruption, cronyism, political and ideological monism and authoritarianism that tends to degenerate in masked forms of dictatorship.

As Jeffrey Goldfarb argued in his exciting book *The Politics of Small Things: The Power of the Powerless in Dark Times* (2007), “spaces for democratic practices are constituted in both established and nascent democracies, as well as under modern and post-modern tyrannies.” To understand how larger movements for change and opposition to tyranny are born and gain momentum is necessary to understand the “micropolitics” of human interaction. Such movements may occur not only in revolutionary contexts, but in seemingly harmless environments and contexts, such as a private dinner, a literary club, a conversation in a café or mediated by an Internet socialization network, etc.

Hence, besides the “big things” that make up world politics—the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, globalization, etc.—one should also pay some attention to the “politics of small things.” The latter occurs when “people freely meet and talk to each other as equals, reveal their differences, display their distinctions, and develop a capacity to act together.”<sup>18</sup> No matter how oppressive the politics of big things becomes, individuals acting in intimate settings can nurture their own miniaturized and underground version of civil society. Goldfarb argues that people can “live in truth” when they stop “using the official language,” extend the kitchen table by finding places where it is safe to do so, and then form publics by networking with other groups who are engaged in similar behaviour.<sup>19</sup> In cyberspace, the politics of small things finds a natural



and favourable space of manifestation in social networks and actions mediated through Websites. Goldfarb believes that the Internet and the autonomous public spaces (even virtual) that it can generate are a powerful tool for challenging the excesses of globalization and superpowers.

Paradoxical remains the fact that although empirically Goldfarb grounds his “politics of small things,” *inter alia*, on the experience of the Prague Spring and of the East European revolutions of 1989 and states that in Poland “people acted as if they lived in a free society and a free society resulted,”<sup>20</sup> he does not mention anywhere the theory and practice of “self-limiting revolution.” However, in substance, “the politics of small things” is nothing more than a version of “self-limiting revolution” adapted to the context and concrete realities of globalization.

## Conclusions

SINCE THE various ways of exiting communism and types of political transition in Eastern Europe are path-dependent, for their proper understanding one should take a comparative broader perspective, grounded in a dual long and short term perspective. Since the experience of 1989 revolutions shows that a successful democratization is a result of a non-violent “negotiated revolution” and the latter is a direct result of the “self-limiting revolution” as theorized and practiced by former Central European dissidents, the notion and practice of “self-limiting revolution” offers a genuine contribution to the theory and practice of revolutions at large. Furthermore, the “self-limiting revolution” puts forward a viable strategy for the self-emancipation and self-institutionalization of civil society in the era of globalization.



## Notes

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## Abstract

### The Typology and Novelty of Eastern European Revolutions

The study suggests a fresh look on the Eastern European revolutions. Firstly, it argues that Western scholarship failed to recognize the novelty of Eastern European revolutions at the time of their occurrence and in their aftermath. Secondly, grounded in the "path-dependent" school of thought and privileging a dual long and short term comparative approach, the study introduces a typology of Eastern European revolutions. Thirdly, it argues that the "self-limiting revolution," as theorized and practiced by former Central European dissidents, offers not only a genuine contribution to the theory of revolutions, but it puts forward a viable practical strategy for the self-emancipation and self-institutionalization of civil society in the era of globalization.

## Keywords

theory of revolutions, Eastern Europe revolutions, "self-limiting revolution," civil society



TYPOLOGY OF EASTERN EUROPEAN REVOLUTIONS

	Poland	Hungary	DDR	Czechoslovakia	Bulgaria	Romania	Albania	USSR	Yugoslavia
Phenomena	present	present	absent	present	absent	absent	absent	present	present
previous tendencies to reform the communist system	1956: "Polish October" ("Revolution from above") 1968: student protests	1956: revolution ("revolution from below")	1953: workers' revolt ("revolution from below")	1968: "Prague Spring" ("revolution from above")		1977: strike 1981: strike 1987: popular uprising		1956: de-Stalinization ("revolution from above")	1971: "Croatian Spring" ("revolution from above")
earlier crises prior to the system's collapse	1970: strikes and protests 1976: strikes 1980-1981: strikes								
development of civil society	Solidarity ("self-limiting revolution") well developed Catholic Church pacifist movements environmental movements movements against society's illnesses human rights movements	well developed Samizdat opposition environmental movements pacifist movements	weak pacifist movements Evangelical Church human rights movements	well developed Charter 77 pacifist movements	weak environmental movements perestroika support movements	weak individual and isolated initiatives	weak individual and isolated initiatives	weak cultural and national movements samizdat opposition	weak pacifist movements

Phenomena	Poland	Hungary	DDR	Czechoslovakia	Bulgaria	Romania	Albania	USSR	Yugoslavia
elites' involvement in the process of political transition	important	important	partial	important	insignificant	insignificant	insignificant	partial	partial
masses' involvement in the process of political transition	insignificant	insignificant	important mass demonstrations	important mass demonstrations	partial demonstrations	important popular uprising	important mass demonstrations	important ethnic mobilization	important ethnic mobilization
ways of abandoning communism	negotiation	negotiation	capitulation	capitulation	coup	coup d'état and popular uprising	popular uprising	implosion	implosion
type of political transition	negotiated peaceful	negotiated peaceful	non-negotiated peaceful	non-negotiated peaceful ("velvet revolution")	non-negotiated peaceful	non-negotiated violent with victims	non-negotiated	non-negotiated	non-negotiated
initiation and direction of transition	top down	top down	bottom up	bottom up	bottom up	bottom up	bottom up	top down	bottom up
subsequent fate of the Communist Party	it changed its name into Polish Social Democratic Party	it changed its name into Hungarian Socialist Party	it changed its name into Party of Democratic Socialism	Czechoslovak Communist Party—the 2 <sup>nd</sup> place in the 1990 elections	it changed its name into Bulgarian Socialist Party	it was abolished Socialist Labour Party—ephemeral successor to the former Romanian Communist Party	it changed its name into Socialist Party of Albania—the 1 <sup>st</sup> place in 1991 elections Communist Party of Albania—ephemeral successor of the former Party of Labour of Albania	it was abolished Communist Party outlawed in Russia successor of Serbian Communist League	it was abolished Socialist Party of Serbia—successor of Serbian Communist League

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Table -- *Continued*

Phenomena	Poland	Hungary	GDR	Czechoslovakia	Bulgaria	Romania	Albania	USSR	Yugoslavia
first free elections	4 June 1990	25 March–4 April 1990	18 March 1990	8 June 1990	June 1990	20 May 1990	31 March 1991		
the presence of former dissidents in the new power structures	Lech Wałęsa Tadeuzs Mazowiecki	József Antall		Václav Havel	Zhelyu Zhelev	Ion Iliescu	Sali Berisha		
ways of changing the constitutional framework	amendments repeals	amendments repeals	repeals	amendments repeals new constitutions Slovakia and Czech Republic 1992	new constitution 1991	new constitution 1991	amendments repeals		