

# The Tragic Failure of “Post-Communism” in Eastern Europe

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*Just before Christmas Day in 2010, a distraught public-television engineer protesting the government’s controversial economic policies hurled himself off a balcony in the Rumanian parliament during a speech by the country’s prime minister. The man, who survived the suicide attempt, reportedly shouted before jumping: “You took the bread away from the mouths of our children! You killed the future of our children!” The hospitalized protester, dressed in a t-shirt declaring “You have killed our future!”, was later identified as 41-year-old Adrian Sobaru, whose autistic teenage son had recently lost government assistance as part of Bucharest’s latest budget-cutting steps. His attempted suicide was broadcast live on Rumania’s public TV as Prime Minister Emil Boc spoke ahead of an unsuccessful no-confidence vote against his conservative cabinet. The fiscal and wage austerity measures that Mr. Sobaru was protesting included a 25% pay cut for all civil servants like him as well as severe reductions in social-assistance payments to parents with disabled children, which he had also been receiving until recently. According to Rumania’s Agerpres news agency, the man’s desperate cries in the parliamentary hall were painfully echoing those heard during the 1989 anti-Communist revolution that toppled Rumania’s maverick and generally pro-Western regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu.*

## **Economic turmoil**

Mr. Sobaru’s tragic leap, later telecast all over the world, struck a sympathetic chord with many Rumanians who saw it as a symbol of the savage inequities and injustices of the post-Communist period. Rumania is mired in a severe recession and its battered economy is expected to decline by at least 2% in 2010, after contracting by 7.1% the previous year. Instead of trying to assist the unemployed and the socially weak, the Bucharest government, which is reportedly riddled with corruption, cronyism and nepotism, has slashed public-sector pay by one-quarter and trimmed all social expenditures, including heating subsidies for the poor as well as unemployment, maternity, and disability benefits. At the same time, the national sales tax was hiked from 19% to 24%, as the authorities are striving to hold the national deficit down to 6.8% in order to meet the stringent fiscal requirements of the European Union (EU), which Rumania had joined in January 2007.

These harsh austerity policies have angered millions of Rumanians who are barely making ends meet in a nation where the average monthly per capita income is about \$400. Angry street protests that have gathered tens of thousands of Rumanians reflect the deep dissatisfaction with mass poverty and the continuing economic crisis, which took Rumania to the edge of bankruptcy. “This isn’t capitalism, in capitalist countries you have a middle class,” one Bucharest-based convenience store manager told an Associated Press reporter. But Rumanian society, she complained, is divided between a tiny minority of very rich

people and a vast impoverished underclass.[1]

While the human tragedy witnessed in the Rumanian Parliament on that pre-Christmas day is quite symptomatic of the Balkan country's pervasive misery and crushed hopes for a better life, it could have easily taken place in any other of the crisis nations of the ex-Communist world who are equally suffering from high unemployment, massive poverty, declining wages, and severe cuts in public spending and living standards. At about the time of Mr. Sobaru's desperate suicide attempt, many of the Czech Republic's 20,000 hospital doctors were quitting their jobs en masse to protest the decision of Prime Minister Petr Necas's cabinet to cut all public expenditures, including healthcare spending, by at least 10% in order to keep the country's troubled finances afloat. These mass resignations were part of the "Thanks, We Are Leaving" campaign launched by disgruntled physicians across the country aimed at putting pressure on the Prague authorities to increase their low wages and provide better working conditions for all medical workers. Confronted with the worst healthcare crisis in the ex-Communist country's history which was endangering the lives of many patients, the Czech government threatened to impose a state of emergency which would force doctors either to get back to work or face harsh legal and financial penalties.

One may also recall the largely unreported 2009 food riots in Latvia, the much lauded "Baltic miracle" darling of the mainstream Western media, where the deeply unpopular incumbent Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis was re-elected in 2010 despite having severely cut public expenditures and Latvians' already meager living standards (the election campaign focused instead on the nasty clash between Latvian nationalists and the country's sizeable and restive Russian-speaking minority). According to Professor Michael Hudson, Distinguished Research Professor of Economics at the University of Missouri, as sharp government cutbacks in social welfare, education, healthcare, public transportation, and other basic social-infrastructure spending threaten to undermine economic security, long-term development, and political stability across the ex-Soviet bloc countries, young people are emigrating in droves to better their lives rather than suffer in an economy without any employment opportunities. For example, more than 12% of the total population of Latvia (and a much larger percentage of its labor force) now works abroad.

When the "neo-liberal bubble" burst in 2008, Professor Hudson writes, Latvia's conservative government borrowed heavily from the EU and IMF on punishing repayment terms that have imposed such harsh austerity policies that the Latvian economy shrank by 25% (neighboring Estonia and Lithuania have experienced an equally steep economic decline) and unemployment, currently running at 22%, is still rising. With well over a tenth of its population now working abroad, Latvia's guest-workers send home whatever they can spare to help their destitute families survive. Latvian children (what few of them there are as the Baltic country's marriage and birth rates are plunging) have been thus "left orphaned behind," prompting social scientists to wonder how this small nation of 2.3 million people can survive demographically.[2] These are the results of post-Communist austerity budgets that have cut ordinary people off at the knees while international creditors and local bankers are bailed out.

### **The rise of right-wing populism**

The deep economic crisis and rising unemployment throughout the ex-Communist world has brought to power some radical political parties and politicians embracing right-wing nationalist populism. Hungary's Fidesz (Hungarian Civic Union), an unabashedly right-wing nationalist party, won 52.73% of the vote in the April 2010 parliamentary elections. Jobbik

(Movement for Better Hungary), a xenophobic far-right party, came third with 16.67% of votes. In the midst of a disastrous economic slump, the nationalist Right won most of the popular vote by reviving traditional Hungarian scape-goating of ethnic minorities and blaming Jews and Gypsies in particular for the country's widespread joblessness and poverty. When Oszkár Molnár, a Fidesz leading member elected to the new parliament, proclaimed: "I love Hungary, I love Hungarians, and I prefer Hungarian interests to global financial capital, or Jewish capital which wants to devour the whole world, but especially Hungary," he was not even publicly rebuked by any of his party colleagues.

In December 2010, Fidesz's two-thirds majority in parliament allowed it to push through a draconian media law, which gave the government more freedom to exercise strict control over the private media. This controversial new law triggered demonstrations in the streets of Budapest with many Hungarians carrying empty placards to protest the proposed government censorship. It also drew criticisms in the European Parliament (Hungary became an EU member in May 2004) for being a "threat to press freedom" and a "serious danger to democracy" by providing for huge fines and other legal penalties for media and Internet outlets which dare to publish or broadcast "unbalanced" or "immoral" information, especially one that is critical of the government, in a nation where one in three lives below the poverty line. Critics have complained that Europe's most restrictive media law will stifle pluralism and turn the clock back on democracy in this former Communist country.

The German press especially has vilified Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán not for only trying to muzzle the local media, but also for seeking a one-party Fidesz rule and turning Hungary into a totalitarian "Führerstaat" (Hungarian commentators have likewise complained of their country's creeping "Orbánization"). Károly Vörös, chief editor of the Hungarian daily *Népszabadság*, has complained that the new media law wants to "burn a sense of fear into the souls of journalists" and that Hungary's "entire constitutional state is systematically dissolving."<sup>[3]</sup> But sensing strong public support at home given the ugly anti-capitalist, anti-EU, and anti-American mood of ordinary Hungarians caught in the vortex of globalization, the Berlusconi-like populist Orbán has, as in the past, taken a defiant stand, warning the EU to stop meddling into Hungary's internal affairs: "It is the EU that should adjust to Hungary, not Hungary to the EU..." (Hungary officially took over the rotating six-month EU presidency on January 1, 2011). But what many Hungarians suspect is that the new media law was just a clever ploy to distract public attention from the country's dire economic problems.

Another autocratic figure, Boyko Borisov, an ex-national police chief with a shady Communist past and reported ties to the local criminal underworld, governs Bulgaria, which became an EU member in January 2007 despite being the most corrupt and criminalized state in the former Eastern bloc apart from the notoriously mafia-ruled Kosovo (another scandalous candidate for future EU membership hoping to join as early as 2015). The electoral success of the Mussolini-like strongman Borisov and his right-wing GERB (Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria) in the July 2009 election was hardly surprising in a country whose plight has become the most emblematic of the region's aberrant post-Communist trajectory and current malady of discontent. By nearly every macroeconomic indicator, Bulgaria is in a worse shape now than in the Communist past.

Official statistics show that both the annual gross national product (GNP) and the per capita income of the population have plummeted, the social-safety net has disintegrated, and even the physical survival of many impoverished Bulgarians is in peril. The immediate effects of market-oriented "reforms" have been the destruction of Bulgaria's industry and agriculture,

unemployment, inflation, flagrant inequality of incomes, crushing poverty, and even malnutrition. Organized crime and endemic corruption in the form of nepotism and cronyism, graft on the job, embezzlement, bribe-taking, influence-peddling, smuggling, protection rackets, illegal gambling, prostitution and pornography rings have exacted a heavy toll on post-Communist living standards and livelihoods. Another unfortunate effect is the widespread neglect of the economic and social rights of ordinary Bulgarians, for many of whom the 8-hour work day is now only a memory.

The disastrous economic environment has in turn generated a rather volatile and unpredictable political climate. No cabinet government elected during the stormy post-Communist period has survived in office for more than one term (and often even less than that). This volatility illustrates the unstable and unpredictable nature of politics in Bulgaria due to the catastrophic economic situation and the glaring inability of the existing party elites to offer a credible solution to it. Fed up with economic decline, government neglect, high-end thievery, rampant crime and corruption, Bulgarians have time and again cast protest votes against the stranglehold on power by incompetent, self-serving, corrupt, and criminalized cliques of party politicians pursuing personal gain. But the end of their misery seems far from sight, especially as Borisov's cabinet has now imposed a draconian austerity budget, cutting no less than 20% of all public spending.

At the same time, politics has become by far the most profitable business—more profitable and also much less risky than any profit-making business activity. This has transformed the political parties into something akin to shark-like business corporations—well-organized coterie of unprincipled and predatory rent-seekers aspiring to take over the reigns of power in order to enrich themselves by exploiting the lethargic, cattle-like populace and plundering Bulgaria's resources, especially now that the country can count on receiving substantial amounts of foreign aid and investment from the EU. Powerful economic interests of often criminal origin have lined up behind and financed each of the major political parties, adding strongly plutocratic elements to what is essentially a kleptocratic, mafia-like oligarchy. That is why ordinary people see no difference between their corruption-riddled government and Bulgaria's well-organized criminal syndicates. Not surprisingly, Bulgarians tend to refer to their country as a "mafia state," a "banana republic," a "circus," and "Absurd-istan." They are still awaiting the long-promised arrival of "normal" capitalism and "normal" democracy where personal economic security, livable wages, and decent living standards will replace today's high unemployment, abject poverty, homelessness, and social despondency. About 1.2 million Bulgarians (16% of the population), mostly young people, have already voted with their feet by seeking greener pastures abroad (poverty-driven emigration has helped reduce post-Communist Bulgaria's population from close to 9 million in 1989 to around 7 million today).

### **Collapse of popular support**

Soon after the fall of Communism, the former Soviet-bloc countries and other regional ex-Communist states were economically neo-liberalized (quite a few of them were also territorially dismembered) and, except for small pro-Western local elites who made out like bandits, their populations became Third-World poor. Nearly all of these twenty-eight Eurasian countries have experienced a long-term economic decline of catastrophic proportions (only Poland has thus far surpassed its Communist-era GDP). Grave economic setbacks, deep-rooted corruption, and widespread popular frustration with the hardships and deprivations of the seemingly endless post-Communist transition are undermining the

prestige of the new authorities and even the population's belief in Western-style democracy and market-based capitalism. A new breed of rapacious and ruthless plutocrats with insatiable appetites for wealth and power has pillaged—through an unjust and corrupt process of privatization—the assets of the formerly state-owned economy and has recreated at home the worst excesses of 19th-century Dickensian capitalism, as if the social progress of the 20th century had never existed. In the midst of widespread joblessness, penury, malnutrition and even hunger, multimillion-dollar private mansions have sprung up in all major cities as palace-like symbols of ill-gotten gains and of unattainable wealth for ordinary people who are struggling just to find jobs, pay daily bills, and find affordable housing. This “new class” of politically-connected nouveau riche with luxurious La Dolce vita lifestyles seems to be prepared to commit any crime in the interests of profit and quick self-enrichment, operating according to King Louis XV's principle “Après moi, le déluge” and dashing everywhere people's hopes for improving their lot and modernizing their country along the lines of a “civilized” nation. The only business flourishing in many of the region's “emerging economies” seems to be organized crime which is usually run by kleptocrats inside the ruling circles.

While this parasitic layer of “new rich” oligarchs is getting richer by the day—in part by evading taxation under the newly adopted system of highly regressive “flat tax” laws—the citizens of the ex-Communist nations now have to pay out of their own pockets for all previously free, government-provided medical services even though they also have to pay income, real-estate, and sales taxes—something they did not have to do under the Communist regimes. There is also the monetization and/or privatization of the previously free educational services, especially in higher education and the new private schools, colleges, and universities where students have to pay for their training, including many fees that each student must pay for taking entrance exams and other mandatory tests required at every level of schooling. Government subsidies for everything from healthcare, education, and legal representation to housing, energy, and public transportation are disappearing in the scramble to slash social spending and trim budget deficits, making it even harder for ordinary people to survive in their daily struggle for existence. The region has become a testing ground to see to what extent workers can be deprived of their social and economic rights, such as a legally-set minimum wage, paid vacations, free and universal access to healthcare, education and legal services, retirement at the age of 60 for men and 55 for women, or even unionization. But despite soaring unemployment and underemployment rates, the iron discipline of the marketplace, and the lack of social welfare or even of most rudimentary social solidarity, the old Communist-era joke “They (the employers) pretend to pay us, we (the employees) pretend to work” seems to be far truer today than it ever was under Communism. For people do not feel like working any harder now for the new private (and often foreign) business owners who seem to be interested only in squeezing as much profit from them for as little pay and as few benefits as possible. At the same time, public education and the sciences, as well as the arts and cultural institutions are all being gutted in the name of saving the “taxpayers' money” (for example, the national academy of sciences has been closed or is about to be closed in a number of the transition countries).

In these crisis-ridden nations where living standards have seriously deteriorated as unemployment, poverty, pauperism, criminality, as well as alcohol and drug abuse are spreading, along with unaffordable prices for basics like food, housing and fuel, public satisfaction with how the government is actually performing is minimal almost everywhere. And where there is a large discrepancy between popular expectations and government performance in terms of providing necessary public goods and services, as in nearly all post-

Communist countries, adherence to democratic attitudes gradually erodes over time. Underperforming regimes which fail to meet public aspirations over long periods of time can lose their legitimacy, risking systemic crisis and instability (e.g., the paradigmatic case of Weimar Germany). Given their appalling living and working conditions, many post-Communist citizens are losing their long-held belief in Western-style capitalism and liberal democracy. Many are also rejecting the very idea that their ex-Communist countries are indeed democratic. The population's negative perceptions of performance thus cannot but affect democratic attitudes (how the value of democracy is perceived) and hence the so-called "democratic deficit" is statistically quite substantial across the entire region. The local governing elites are slowly losing their legitimacy to rule.

As a result, public protests and social unrest are common, including the dozen or so controversial "color" revolutions—both successful and unsuccessful depending on the extent of Western support for them—against popularly-elected but often deeply unpopular governments. In January 2011, for example, several protesters were shot dead and 150 were wounded during an anti-government demonstration in the Albanian capital Tirana. Albania's conservative Prime Minister Sali Berisha vowed that he would not allow the toppling of his government, but the opposition has held new demonstrations in Tirana and other Albanian cities and has promised to stage even more protests in the future. Supporters of the opposition Socialist Party blame the authorities for widespread financial wrong-doing, pandemic crime and corruption, the run-down economy, and the glaring lack of basic public utilities. They also demand the holding of new elections, accusing the government of massive vote-rigging during the disputed 2009 election which Berisha's ruling Democrats won by a tiny margin. Tensions further escalated when Berisha publicly accused his Socialist opponents of attempting a "Tunisia-style uprising," a reference to the recent bloody overthrow of Tunisia's dictatorial president in which scores were killed. Similar anti-government protests are held regularly in post-Soviet Georgia in spite of the efforts of the "democratic" authorities to crush all dissent. The disgruntled opposition blames Georgia's strongman Mikheil Saakashvili for the disastrous 2008 war with Russia and for the country's sinking fortunes. "The overwhelming majority of the population is on the brink of poverty. Nothing is working in Georgia except for the police state," Lasha Chkhartishvili of the opposition Conservative Party told visiting foreign journalists in February 2011 during anti-Saakashvili demonstrations around the parliament building in the Georgian capital Tbilisi. "Saakashvili's dictatorial regime is bound to collapse because there is an end to people's patience." [4]

For the moment, all eyes are on the Muslim world and on the degree to which the pro-democracy efforts of the Arab nations are transforming politics throughout the Greater Middle East. But the tinder for such uprisings exists almost everywhere, especially in the post-Communist parts of the world. Simmering unrest to protest poverty, joblessness, and endemic official thievery after more than 20 years of incompetent, corrupt and deceitful post-Communist governance—combined with the disastrous laissez faire economic experiment across the entire former Soviet bloc—has produced a region-wide instability, where the survival of some West-backed regimes appears increasingly at risk. This is confirmed by unprecedented informal speculation strongly reminiscent of the period before the downfall of Communism—such as many readers' comments in the local media forums, for example—about the instability and reversibility of the new post-Communist order and its possible replacement by Latin American-style "revolutionary democracy." This sense of regime insecurity and fragility has been reinforced by the wave of Communist nostalgia sweeping many ex-Communist nations.

## Communist nostalgia

There is a great disillusionment with the failed promises of the 1989 revolutions, which have brought a rapid decline in living standards for the majority of former Communist citizens. The widespread exasperation with the impoverishment, corruption, street crime and general social chaos that have accompanied the transition to market-oriented capitalism and Western-style democracy has produced a growing nostalgia for the Communist past among many ordinary people (who are not part of their countries' new cosmopolitan and pro-Western elites), as they look back with increasing fondness to the "good old times" of Communism—a disturbing trend across the region popularly known as the "Soviet chic."

According to the recently published Rumanian Evaluation and Strategy Survey, 45% of Rumanians believe they would have lived better if the anti-Communist revolution had not occurred at all. After twenty-one years of turbulent post-Communist life, 61% of the survey participants said they currently live under much worse conditions than they did under Ceaușescu, while only 24% said they are better off now. If these survey results are to be believed (the poll was taken in late 2010 from a sample of 1,476 adults and has an error margin of plus/minus 2.7%), Ceaușescu has turned into a martyr figure that most Rumanians are very sympathetic to. At least 84% of the respondents believe it was a bad thing that he was executed without a fair public trial and 60% even regret his death.[5] According to another recent survey, 59% of Rumanians consider Communism to be a good idea. Some 44% of the respondents think this good idea was poorly applied, while only 15% think it was applied correctly. Just 29% of Rumanians still view Communism as a bad idea. There are no significant differences between men and women with regard to this question, but positive views about Communism are related to age and place of residence. A majority of those older than 40 consider Communism a good idea (including 74% of those older than 60, and 64% of those aged 40-59). But only a minority does so among the younger generation who do not even remember the Ceaușescu regime (49% of those aged 20-39, and just 31% of those younger than 20). Rural respondents have a more positive view—only 21% of them consider Communism a bad idea, compared to 34% of urban respondents.[6] And many Rumanians remember with longing the days when most of them had a steady job, inexpensive state-provided housing, free healthcare, and government-subsidized holidays on the Black Sea coast. "I regret the demise of Communism—not for me, but when I see how much my children and grandchildren struggle," said a 68-year-old retired mechanic. "We had safe jobs and decent salaries under Communism. We had enough to eat and we had yearly vacations with our children." [7]

The "Soviet chic" is especially popular among the residents of former East Germany where it is known as "Ostalgie." [8] According to an article in the conservative German magazine *Der Spiegel*, "Glorification of the German Democratic Republic is on the rise two decades after the Berlin Wall fell. Young people and the better-off are among those rebuffing criticism of East Germany being an illegitimate state." In a recent poll cited by *Der Spiegel*, more than half (57%) of ex-East Germans defended the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). "The GDR had more good sides than bad sides. There were some problems, but life was good there," claimed 49% of those polled. Eight percent of East Germans flatly rejected any criticism of their former homeland or agreed with the statement that "The GDR had, for the most part, good sides. Life there was happier and better than in reunified Germany today." These poll results which were released on the 20th anniversary since the fall of the Berlin Wall reveal that nostalgia for former East Germany has reached deep into the hearts of many ex-East Germans. It is no longer merely the nostalgic older people who mourn the loss

of the GDR. “A new form of Ostalgie has taken shape,” historian Stefan Wolle is quoted as saying. “The yearning for the ideal world of the dictatorship goes well beyond former government officials,” complains Wolle. “Even young people who had almost no experience with the GDR are idealizing it today.”[9]

“Not even half of young people in eastern Germany describe the GDR as a dictatorship, and a majority believe the Stasi was a normal intelligence service,” political scientist Klaus Schroeder, director of a research institute at Berlin’s Free University that studies the former communist state, concluded in a 2008 study of eastern Germany’s youth. “These young people cannot—and in fact have no desire to—recognize the dark sides of the GDR.” Schroeder’s own research gives a shocking insight into the thoughts of many disaffected ex-GDR citizens. “From today’s perspective, I believe that we were driven out of paradise when the Wall came down,” an East German is quoted as saying, while another, a 38-year-old man, thanked God that he had lived in the GDR, because it was not until after German reunification that he saw for the first time in his life homeless people, beggars, and impoverished people who fear for their survival. Today’s Germany is described by many ex-East Germans as a “slave state” and a “capitalist dictatorship,” while some totally reject reunified Germany for being, in their opinion, too capitalist and too dictatorial, and certainly not democratic. Schroeder finds such statements alarming: “I am afraid that a majority of East Germans do not identify with the current sociopolitical system.” According to another ex-East German citizen quoted in the same *Der Spiegel* article, “In the past, a campground was a place where people enjoyed their freedom together.” And what he misses most today is “that feeling of companionship and solidarity.” His verdict on the GDR is clear: “As far as I’m concerned, what we had in those days was less of a dictatorship than what we have today.” Not only does he want to see again the GDR’s equal wages and equal pensions, but he also complains that people cheat and lie everywhere in unified Germany, and that today’s injustices are simply perpetrated in a more devious way than in the GDR, where starvation wages and street crime were totally unknown.[10]

In reaction to the region-wide spread of Communist nostalgia and also to changes in the domestic climate of opinion where the last Polish Communist leader, General Wojciech Jaruzelski, is far more popular than the formerly revered but now marginalized anti-Communist icon—the ex-Solidarity trade-union chief, Nobel Peace Prize laureate, and later president Lech Walesa—Poland’s fervent anti-Communists have revised the criminal code to include an official ban on all symbols of Communism. Under the new law worthy of the medieval Catholic Inquisition, Poles can now be fined and imprisoned if they are caught singing the “International,” for example, or if they carry a red flag, a red star or hammer-and-sickle insignia, and other Communist-era symbols, or even wear a Che Guevara t-shirt. Likewise, the conservative Czech government is trying to outlaw the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (even though the latter won over 11% of the popular vote in the last parliamentary election of May 2010 and is represented in both houses of the national parliament) ostensibly because its leadership refuses to remove the sacrilegious word “Communist” from the party’s name. Several ex-Communist EU members have recently urged Brussels to push for an EU-wide ban on downplaying or denying the crimes of the old Communist regimes. “The principle of justice should assure a just treatment for the victims of every totalitarian regime,” the foreign ministers of Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, and Rumania wrote in a letter to the EU justice commissioner, in which they insisted that “public condoning, denial, and gross trivialization of totalitarian crimes” should be criminalized in every EU country. At the instigation of anti-Communist deputies from the post-Communist countries, the European Parliament has already passed a



controversial resolution on “totalitarianism” which equates Communism with Nazism and fascism. But all such punitive measures have hardly curbed the epidemic of Communist nostalgia: the most popular t-shirt among eastern Berliners today is one declaring “Give me back my Wall. And this time make it two meters higher!”

### **Are the ex-Communist countries next?**

With the attention of Western governments and publics now focused on the tumultuous tensions and conflicts in the Arab world, people tend to ignore or forget the crises gripping the ex-Communist nations. Given the rampant inequality, immiseration, government corruption, and organized crime that have characterized the post-Communist order, the situation in these formerly Communist lands is no less combustible than in North Africa and the Middle East, and one of these days it could turn out to be far shakier than is now imagined. Is Tunisia, Egypt or even Libya a likely future scenario for this troubled region?

For now, the long-suffering but very patient citizens of these transition countries are clenching their teeth in the hope that the very next election will bring to power a messianic savior on a white horse who—along with far more generous assistance from the West’s supposedly bottomless pockets—will at long last extricate their bankrupt, poverty-stricken societies from the abyss into which they have fallen. Ordinary people in the post-Communist part of the world believe that their democratic revolutions and high expectations have been betrayed, hijacked or stolen by various “dark forces,” ranging from the ex-Communist elites who have now replaced their former political power with money power, to a corrupt alliance (in the vision of many native leftists) between ambitious local pseudo-“democrats” and greedy Western capitalists, and finally, to an insidious conspiracy involving the IMF, the World Bank, the Soros Foundation, and “international Jewish finance” (usually in the eyes of the nationalist far-right). As Sir Robert Chiltern quips in Oscar Wilde’s witty comedy *An Ideal Husband*, “When the gods wish to punish us, they answer our prayers.”

Only time will tell if the answered prayers of the ex-Communist nations will ultimately prove to be a punishment from above. On the other hand, it may open up new vistas for these struggling nations to resist the crushing power of international banks and multinational corporations by adopting progressive reforms aimed at creating a democratic world order not controlled by the overlords of globalization and the local comprador elites that serve them.

### **Notes**

[1] George Jahn, “In Romania, Turmoil Fuels Nostalgia for Communism,” *Washington Post*, January 11, 2011.

[2] Michael Hudson and Jeffrey Sommers, “Latvia Provides No Magic Solution for Indebted Economies,” *Guardian.co.uk*, December 20, 2010.

[3] “There’s More at Stake than Just Freedom of the Press,” *Der Spiegel International*, January 19, 2011.

[4] “Saakashvili Has Turned Georgia into A Police State,” *Interfax*, February 11, 2011.

[5] “45% of Romanians Say ‘Ceaușescu, Please Forgive Us for Being Drunk in December (1989),’” *Bucharest Herald*, December 29, 2010.

[6] The results of this survey conducted among a representative sample of Rumanians between 22 October and 1 November 2010 were released by the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of Romanian Exiles at [http://www.crimelecomunismului.ro/en/about\\_iiccr](http://www.crimelecomunismului.ro/en/about_iiccr).

[7] Jahn, "In Romania, Turmoil Fuels Nostalgia for Communism."

[8] "Ostalgie" is derived from the German words Ost (east) and Nostalgie (nostalgia) and refers to the widespread sense of longing for many aspects of life in the former German Democratic Republic.

[9] Julia Bonstein, "Majority of East Germans Feel Life Better under Communism," Der Spiegel International, July 3, 2009.

[10] Ibid. The British Guardian marked the 20th anniversary since the fall of the Berlin Wall with an article by an ex-East German academic who similarly lamented the demise of the GDR which, she claimed, offered "social and gender equality, full employment and lack of existential fears, as well as subsidized rents." According to her, unification has "brought social breakdown, widespread unemployment, blacklisting, a crass materialism and an 'elbow society'...." See Bruni de la Motte, "East Germans Lost Much in 1989: For Many in the GDR the Fall of the Berlin Wall and Unification Meant the Loss of Jobs, Homes, Security and Equality," Guardian.co.uk, November 8, 2009.

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