

THE FUTURE OF IRAN: EDUCATIONAL REFORM

# Learning from Post-Communist Transitions:

THE CASE OF EDUCATIONAL REFORMS  
IN CENTRAL-EASTERN EUROPE

By Cesar Birzea



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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

#### Cesar Birzea

Cesar Birzea is a professor at the National School for Political and Administrative Studies in Bucharest, Romania. He teaches education and policy courses at Master and Doctorate levels. He is a former director of the National Institute for Educational Research in Romania. Professor Birzea also served as Chair of the Educational Committee of the Council of Europe, President of the Council of Europe project on Education for Democratic Citizenship and President of the National Council for Educational Reform in Romania. He has authored several publications, including *Educational Policies in the Countries in Transition* (Council of Europe Press, 1994), *Education for Democratic Citizenship: A Lifelong Perspective* (Council of Europe, 2000), and *European Citizenship* (Bucharest, Politeia, 2005). Professor Birzea earned his PhD in Education Sciences from the University of Cluj in Romania.

That education is a major lever for development and progress is a well-established truism: All historical changes were accompanied by educational reforms that shaped minds, institutions and social relationships. At all times, the elites produced by schools and universities conceived and implemented new projects for society.

Post-communist transitions in Central and Eastern Europe offer interesting lessons that can be applied beyond the region's own geographic and cultural background. The political changes that suddenly occurred in 1989 engaged systemic reforms in all fields, including education. Post-communist transitions created a rapidly changing social environment, which De Soto and Anderson have compared to an attempt to accelerate history.<sup>1</sup>

Although transition is an omnipresent historical process, interest in it increased considerably in the 1990s with the experience of Central and Eastern Europe (CEECs). Thus the academic world remembered Hegel's historical dialectic, according to which history means not only continuity and passing from one stage to another, but also ruptures and denials of the previous order. Whether it was the "Velvet Revolution" in Czechoslovakia, "Televised Revolution" in Romania, "Melancholic Revolution" in Hungary or "Singing Revolution" in Estonia, all had a common goal: to replace totalitarian rule with democratic governments.

However, circumstances and effects differed depending on the degree of democratic opening and the economic situation of each country in 1989. Moreover, as shown on different occasions,<sup>2</sup> political transitions deepened existing historical differences; for example between countries from Central and Eastern Europe, between countries from the former USSR and the rest of the

communist bloc, and between those with old parliamentary traditions and the new democracies. The countries that had attempted economic and cultural liberalisation in the 1970s and 1980s were better prepared for moving to a new political regime.

On the whole, what we generically call transition, meaning to move from one state to another, actually meant three interdependent processes of reform:<sup>3</sup>

- a) Political reforms lasted an average of five years and aimed to reinstall pluralism, respect for human rights, and the rule of law. All these countries started their political transition by adopting new constitutions (1991) and organising free elections (1992).
- b) Economic reforms lasted approximately 10 years and had the following objectives: liberalisation of prices, creation of a more competitive business environment, conversion of national currencies, gradual privatisation by re-establishment of land ownership, large-scale privatisation of major "socialist" companies, sale or free distribution of shares, and direct or indirect restitution to former owners.
- c) Cultural reforms, including educational reforms, were the slowest and the most difficult, being spread over a period of at least one generation (25 years). They are still being developed at present, although some results have already appeared. We will insist upon this essential component of post-communist transition.

Why is the cultural and psychological component of post-totalitarian transition the most difficult? The answer is given by Lord Dahrendorf who, in a well-known book entitled *Reflections on the Revolutions in Europe* compared post-communist transitions to crossing the desert in biblical times, where Moses' people needed to cross the desert for 40 years so that only the new generation, who knew nothing of servitude, would reach the Promised Land.

In other words, post-totalitarian transition cannot be reduced to a simple regime change or to a linear translation process. It is a long-term learning experience through which persons, communities and institutions must assume the rules and values of a new way of life. This period of moving from one type of society to another is characterised by an interregnum culture, where the new institutions and values co-exist together with mentalities and behaviours of "residual communism."

As we have shown in another study,<sup>4</sup> this interregnum culture is characterised by the following tendencies:

- The emblematic values of communism, such as revolutionary militancy, patriotic labour, class struggle, submission to the state-party, are on the verge of extinction. They are manifested only in those who remain nostalgic about the former regime and take the form of collectivist or egalitarian reactions, an effect of residual communism.

- On the other hand, new values have emerged which were deemed unacceptable under the previous regime: freedom, personal initiative, political pluralism, human rights, critical thinking and multiculturalism.
- Traditional values, prohibited by the communist regime, such as nationalism, elitism, monarchy, religion, privacy and property, have re-emerged and are relatively influential.
- Some values associated with the old regime persist yet they have either changed in content, such as equality, solidarity, citizenship, membership, wellbeing; or are no longer considered so important, such as loyalty, discipline, altruism, collectivism.

Romania experienced the toughest and most repressive communist regime in Europe in the 1980s—it faced extensive economic sacrifices and deprivation. The transition started with a bloody revolution and was slower and more contested than in other parts of Europe. By the end of the 1990s, the first two components of post-communist transition were implemented, namely political reforms and transition to a market economy, but democratic learning still continues today. Educational

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reform started with immediate corrective measures, such as relinquishing ideological control, and under the Law of 1995, took up concrete restructuring measures: a new curriculum, differentiated manuals, a new “per capita” financing system, university autonomy, and a new system of teacher education.

An interesting indicator is the evolution of the role of the state in managing educational matters. Before 1989, the state-party and its ideology had an absolute monopoly on educational institutions. In fact, education was a tool of mass indoctrination, where teachers and pupils did not have the freedom to choose contents and methods; after graduation, students were forced to engage in jobs designated by the state and all educational institutions were the property of the state without recognising the contributions of other stakeholders. The curriculum was unique, without local or regional variations, and teachers’ mobility was blocked, thereby forcibly ensuring the presence of teaching staff in remote and poor regions.

Transition led to decentralisation, pluralism, and private initiative in education, which were unacceptable before 1989. The 1995 Law and, mainly, the 2011 Law on Education, encouraged private education and alternative schools. At present, there are an equal number of accredited private and public universities (approximately 60 each) and the autonomy of universities is guaranteed by the Constitution.

Education for minorities is delivered in their mother tongues and 30% of the curriculum is decided on the individual school level. Parents, local authorities and NGOs participate in school boards, school books are varied (though created based on a national curriculum) and are printed by private publishing houses. Equally, educational software, evaluation tests and teaching materials are produced by private companies, but with higher prices than the ones subsidised by the state before 1989. In brief, the state remains the guarantor of the right to education (as provided by Article 32 of the revised Constitution in 2003) but allows the participation of various partners (NGOs, employers, parents, media) and the existence of an education market.

Some teachers, parents and students are not happy with this development. They criticise the new pedagogical capitalism as it might increase inequalities and might limit access to educational services for poor people, who make up 40% of the Romanian population. The state tries to minimise these effects through equity-

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driven measures, such as subventions, financial support, admission quotas, and free provision of services such as counselling, medical assistance, and transport.

Any transition, through its own evolving nature, implies a starting point, a target and duration. In the case of CEECs, the first benchmark is relatively known, namely the ousting of the totalitarian regime by the revolutions of 1989. The targets are, obviously, democracy and a market economy, and the duration depends on the actual circumstances of the various countries. In a comparative analysis, Rosati<sup>5</sup> estimates the duration of post-communist transitions to be between 10 years (for the Czech Republic and Slovenia) and 60 years (for Romania and Bulgaria). These estimations, based on macroeconomic scenarios, are confirmed by more recent European Commission data regarding economic convergence, showing that the last member states (admitted in 2007) will reach the median level of EU-27 economies in over 20 years. If we add the fact that post-communist transitions actually started in 1990, we reach the same conclusions as those of Rosati, on the condition that the current global economic crisis does not disturb too much of the European context.

Educational data also confirms these gaps.<sup>6</sup> Although in some aspects (enrolments in compulsory education, ratio of students to teachers, study of sciences and mathematics, reading levels) CEEC performance has been similar to established members of the EU, new problems have appeared that show the gaps.

For example:<sup>7</sup>

- a) Student population decreased in all European countries. The CEECs do not counteract the demographic decline in Western Europe (where the average fertility rate is 1.5). On the contrary, the CEECs face their own demographic decline (at an average fertility rate of 1.3), which has been exacerbated by high levels of emigration, primarily by youth.
- b) The share of the population aged 18-24 with only lower secondary education is on average 10% for the EU-27, with big variations among the CEECs: 4.8% in Slovenia and the Czech Republic compared to 19.5% in Latvia, 21% in Bulgaria, and 23.3% in Romania.
- c) The average duration of formal education in the CEECs is slightly under the average of the EU-27 of 17.2 years.
- d) The percentage of scientists and engineers produced by higher education in CEECs is similar to the EU-27 average (around 10%) but at least a third of them emigrate.
- e) Foreign students enrolled in tertiary education as a percentage of all students is much reduced in the CEECs: 0.1% in Bulgaria and Latvia, 0.2% in Slovenia and Estonia compared to the EU average of 2.3%.
- f) CEECs are less prepared for multiculturalism: in 2010, the proportion of the population born abroad was between 10% and 20% in the EU-27 but under 2% in CEECs. Instead, mainly as a means of academic mobility and emigration, the youths from CEECs make more efforts to learn foreign languages: 99.4% in Romania and 100% in Estonia compared to an average rate of 85% in the EU-27.
- g) The proportion of total public expenditure on education is around 5% in the EU-27 (the highest level is in Denmark with 7%) but fewer than 3% in Romania.
- h) The majority of students in the CEECs are enrolled in public schools (more than 98% in Romania, Lithuania, and Croatia). On average, 14% of students from primary to upper-secondary education receive their education in private settings in the EU-27 (the highest percentage is in Belgium, with more than 40%, Spain and France with 21%; and 15.8% in the UK).

At the beginning of the 1990s, the transition target was vaguely focused on two big objectives: democracy and a market economy. Not even the most optimistic analysts were capable of foreseeing the effective developments that led to EU membership. Then, the “Back-to-Europe” slogan, seldom invoked, was more a wish of normality and historical justice than a coherent historical project.

Belonging to a global system of economic and political integration such as the EU has in fact changed the initial objectives and launched a new transition for the CEECs. The transition’s target is no longer any kind of democratic society, but now more specifically a competitive and prosperous one with certain standards

of quality. The Lisbon Agenda (2000) and the Strategy Europe 2020 established common objectives that will transform the EU into a global player. Post-communist transition was thus absorbed into an ample process of globalisation with important effects on the participating countries. Kok<sup>8</sup> and other authors have asked if these ambitions might have been unrealistic, as the gains of the 1990s did not have the necessary time to consolidate. We should not forget the fact that the EU, with almost 30 members so unequal, is already proving tired of integration and is already thinking about a “Europe with more speeds”.

This “new transition” underlined the potential of CEECs (now called “emergent EU countries”) but also demonstrated the persistence of some historical gaps that risk affecting the achievement of the common benchmarks of Europe 2020. Below are only three examples from the field of education:<sup>9</sup>

- Although the target for spending on research and development is 3%, the gross domestic expenditure on R&D as a percentage of GDP is 0.54% in Romania and 0.70% in Bulgaria compared to 4% in Finland and 3% in Germany;
- The EU 2020 benchmark for school drop-out rate is less than 10%; however it remains high in Romania (18%), Portugal (22%) and Malta (32%), with 15% in the UK and 11% in Germany;
- The EU-27 target for 2020 concerning tertiary educational attainment (the share of the population aged 30-34 years who have successfully completed university education) is 40% in order to be comparable with the USA and Japan; while it is 20% in Romania, 23% in the Czech Republic, 28% in Bulgaria, and 29% in Hungary. The highest percentages are in France and the UK with 42% and Norway with 50%.

These data show the limits of transition as a historical phenomenon. On the one hand, those hoping to move to another way of governing since the 1989 revolutions saw their expectations fulfilled. These expectations were even surpassed through accession to the EU. But the world did not wait for the success of the new evolutions, thus the CEECs were exposed to a new transition undertaken within an extremely competitive global system. The new transition underlined again the gaps and the problems, but it also created new opportunities—the word “krisis,” originally coined by the Greeks, means not only disorder and instability, but also new opportunities and the beginning of a new order.

## FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> H.G. De Soto & D.G. Anderson (eds.) *'The Curtain Rises: Rethinking Culture, Ideology and the State in Eastern Europe'* (New Jersey: Atlantic Highlands, Humanities Press, 1993).
- <sup>2</sup> C. Birzea, "Education in a World in Transition: between Post-Communism and Post-Modernism." *Prospects* (UNESCO), 1996, vol. 26, no.4, pp. 673-681.
- <sup>3</sup> C. Birzea, "Educational Policies of the Countries in Transition" (Strasbourg: Council of Europe Press, 1994, p.13).
- <sup>4</sup> C. Birzea, "Transition, Back to Europe and Educational Reforms in Central Eastern Europe." Paper presented at the International Seminar on Transitions in Europe (Oxford University, 5-6 July 2005).
- <sup>5</sup> D.K. Rosati, "Economic Disparities in Central and Eastern Europe and the Impact of EU Enlargement" (Geneva: UNECE and the Central European Initiative, 1998).
- <sup>6</sup> P. Rado, "Transition in Education" (Budapest: Open Society Institute, 2001).
- <sup>7</sup> "Key Data in Education in Europe" (Brussels, EC-Eurydice, 2012).
- <sup>8</sup> W. Kok, 'Facing the Challenge'. *The Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Employment* (Brussels: European Communities, 2004).
- <sup>9</sup> "Europe 2020" Data from [http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index_en.htm) (European Commission, 2012)

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**LEGATUM INSTITUTE**  
11 Charles Street  
Mayfair  
London W1J 5DW  
United Kingdom

t: +44 (0) 20 7148 5400  
f: +44 (0) 20 7148 5401

<http://twitter.com/LegatumInst>

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