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**CHALLENGES FACING
THE COMPARATIVE STUDIES
OF COMMUNISM**

This *Divinatio* issue contains the reports from a conference held in Sofia on 25 and 26 November 2015 which was initiated by the team of an international research project entitled, “Regime and Society in the Countries of Eastern Europe (1956-1989)”. This group of scholars felt the need to trace back and make insights into the process of exiting communism, of the incremental hollowing out of its constituent principles, and its ultimate loss of legitimacy. We are convinced that it is necessary to further clarify the reasons for the failure of the communist project and probe into the raft of existing explanations of its end: was it brought about by a sheer mystery, or by personal mistakes of the Soviet leader, by its falling into economic doldrums, by dissident pressure, by a growing mass disgruntlement, by the changing *Weltanschauung* of reformist-minded communist elites, etc.? Tracking and comparing these factors will bring us closer to a better understanding of not only the communist episode, but of Europe’s most recent history as a whole.

We were aware that this objective could not be met without some theoretical insights into a few general issues of international historic comparative research and its empirical basis. The principles of contrasting research were laid down by Marc Bloch and have not changed substantially since, but the era of mass communication and globalisation has brought fresh highlights and new challenges. We are facing a series of important questions. Here are some of them. What subjects will benefit a comparative history study between individual states? What would the objectives of such a study be? What are the adequate methods for this kind of research? And finally, what benefits could a multi-country historical comparison reap? None of these

10 questions has a clear-cut answer. The multifaceted nature of the comparative approach is a consequence of the choice of subjects and the objectives the comparative process will be striving to achieve.

Several strategy choices are possible with comparative research: comparing countries of similar origins and development paths; comparing starkly different countries; and comparing countries of contrasting origins, which however belong (ed) to a single political line-up and therefore sharing a common political and cultural project. Each one of these choices entails different approaches and pursues different goals.

One of the conference papers, based on the pre-Sovietization industrial model of development, raised the question whether the German Democratic Republic was a country without analogue in the Eastern bloc. There are certain grounds to assume as much – yet at the same time we could ask whether this choice does not side-line the political model and its influence on the country's subsequent economic development.

At the end of the day, the economic situation became subject of discussion in most of the papers although the majority of them were focused on a single country. But they no less presented cases of deployment of the comparative approach: the so-called internal comparative analysis is attempting to get hold of the intensifying dynamic of reformist ideas in the economy and how they influence politics.

The classical historical comparative studies typically scrutinise static conditions e.g. the degree of industrialisation of the chosen countries, their political or legal systems, the situation of women, etc. Yet recently researchers have increasingly shifted their focus onto social processes, which might have lasted decades.

This takes us back to the focus of our conference: to study comparatively the relationship between regime and society in the countries of the communist bloc in Eastern Europe in the aftermath of the forced obliteration of differences between Central and Eastern Europe. This type of research is bound to shed light on a complex, meandering dynamic: in the beginning (after the 1944-1947 transition), there was a shift from variance to similarity; thereafter (following 1956), a movement took place from similarity to differences; and by the end (after the unleashing of the Euro-integration process) – another shift towards semblance took centre-stage. This sounds like an entangled curve to follow – and it requires a specific research kit. It is a process of consistent zigzagging from national to international and back.

The study that gave rise to the conference includes five countries: Bulgaria, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and the German Democratic Re-

public. In the period 1956-1989, they fall into the category of countries exhibiting differences within the framework of a distinct political community. At the early stages of that period, their differences were largely wiped out by an external unifying matrix: the Soviet tanks-backed messianic ideology imported from their Eastern patron. These divergent countries were levelled off into “socialist societies” by means of coercive suppression – or sweeping into the social margins, even into people’s sub-conscience – of national cultural specifics and the civilisation standards that the socialist “revolution” found in place. And the differences were either wiped out or at least blurred by the dominant political culture. **11**

If we had included the USSR in our comparative study, then we had to scrutinise yet one more element: the relationship between the imperial centre and the various parts of the imperial periphery. This element would have provided some additional characteristics to each one of our subject countries – and would have introduced some other nuances of semblance and variance. On the other hand, societies across Eastern Europe would have appeared more homogenous compared to the state of society in the Soviet Union. If our comparative analysis had included China as well, then our task would have been even more complicated: the emergence of a second imperial centre would have come to the fore, and the rivalry between the two. This would have given insights into the relations between ideology (or the dominant political culture) and cultural tradition.

Within the boundaries of our chosen comparison subjects – the countries of the European Eastern bloc – our task was to find out to what degree the subject of specific comparative scrutiny defines the theoretical principles of the research itself. Hence, what we need is an applied methodology which is a tool available in advance just as much as it is a research outcome. We are hopeful that our discussion on these issues that made its way into the presented papers and the subsequent exchange of opinion (reflected in the papers’ final versions published here) is capable of enriching and solidifying some of the principles of comparative historic research not only on communism.

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