

MEMORY OF NATIONS

Democratic Transition Guide



[Experience of Selected Countries]

CEVRO

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INTRODUCTION

In September 2016, CEVRO launched a project aimed at making the democratic transition experience of selected countries available in an organized and systematic manner. During the first year of the project, CEVRO has collected experience from seven countries (the Czech Republic, Estonia, Egypt, Germany, Poland, Romania and Russia) that underwent a political transition in the recent past. During the second year of the project, the transition experience of Argentina, Cambodia and Georgia were added into the database. The aim of the project is clear: the more the reformers of the emerging democracies prepared for the changes, the easier the transition; better governance is formed and a more sustainable democratic system will exist.

The recent experience of the states of the former Soviet bloc shows that a lack of knowledge and successful examples of democratic transition at the early stages of their own change are the main causes of the backsliding of public support toward traditional institutions, government and even the democratic system. During the first ten to fifteen years of political changes, people understood the need for structural changes and demonstrated a greater tolerance to transitional mistakes.

But now, over twenty-five years after the changes, citizens rightfully expect best practices of good governance, corruption mitigation and a high level of freedom. There is zero tolerance for malpractice in governance or cases of corruption. A combination of this along with other challenges for society and also the recent memory of the crimes of the previous regimes, lead to a rise of extremist forces, as well as the revival to prominence of the previous communist regimes. This is the case of many countries in Central and Eastern Europe.

Events of recent years have shown that the demand for democratization of authoritarian or otherwise non-democratic regimes is strong and growing worldwide, spreading even to societies without democratic tradition. Concurrently, with the rise of modern communication technologies, and information being accessible like never before, it can be argued that non-democratic regimes will, in the near future, find it increasingly difficult to resist the pressure of their own people as well as to maintain their own ability to stay in power.

In this environment, what is often overlooked are the issues of long-term reconciliation within their society, resolving the questions of past wrongdoings, and dealing with its own history in a way that is just and honest. The focus of any new governing body stepping in immediately after a political transition is indeed critical to maintaining national stability, developing a working governing and political structure, and preserving the well-being of its people. Speaking from the European experience, often, once a certain level of social content is met, a sense of job well done takes over before the work is finished.

The experience of countries that underwent transition in recent decades shows that facing the questions of the past, in particular addressing the legitimacy and legality of the former regime and remembering its crimes and their perpetrators, is as crucial to the democratization of any society as is a working legal system or a developed economy. To avoid the proverbial “repeating of its own past”, marginalization of the history and past

wrongs, taking a clear stance concerning both the victims and the culprits, and embedding this stance into the legal system, education and society’s memory is a necessary, but often underestimated, task for every transitioning nation.

A prime example of the consequences of such an underestimation might be the Czech Republic, where more than 25 years after the fall of communism, the unreformed Communist Party still presents a major political force with an increasing portion of its electorate being young voters. Former members and informants of the brutally oppressive secret service remain in high positions in both private and public sector, and members of the anti-communist resistance movement still have not been fully recognized for their activities.

It is therefore important for any reformers and democratic leaders to pay attention to reconciliation with the past. Otherwise their attempts to democratize their countries and set up good governance to stabilize society for the long term can be undermined by shadows of the past. Unfortunately, the issues of reconciliation, punishment of the totalitarian crimes, and preservation of memory are not priorities for the first phases of any transition. Partly, it is because the democratic leaders have other priorities (such as economic transformation or free elections), but it is also because the issues of memory preservation and reconciliation are not priorities for democratic assistance, and therefore the leaders are not equipped with the sufficient skills.

Memory of Nations: Democratic Transition Guide aims to provide guidance. Its goal is not to give step-by-step instructions to the transitioning nation, as this would not be a realistic goal given the uniqueness of each such situation. The aim is to provide a comprehensive set of issue-specific advice, coming from real-life experience, case studies dealing with the most frequent problems, and a “witness account” of past errors. More than a “what you should do now”, the Guide would answer questions of “what would we have done differently”, striving, not to avoid mistakes but, to avoid repeating them.

The Guide offers a unified overview of the best practices, as well as the learnt mistakes, from countries that have undergone transition in recent years. This comparative study can serve you, the current and future reformers, as a reference point for your own activities. You will be able to study different practices and access what might have positive impact in your own country, while developing your political system and improving governance.

The unified structure of the studies will help you compare experience of different countries and choose the best model for your own country. The Lessons Learnt part will help you avoid mistakes made during the previous transitions.

This Guide of the transitional experience will be regularly updated and new countries will be added. Organizers of this project will further focus on adding the experience of non-European countries in the future to make the Guide more universal. The aim of the Guide is to become an open encyclopedia available online to democratic reformers from all around the world.

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