

SABRINA P. RAMET

East Central Europe and Communism, Politics, Culture, Society, 1943-1991
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The book *East Central Europe and Communism, Politics, Culture, Society, 1943-1991*, was published in 2023 by Sabrina P. Ramet – professor of Political Science at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, specialized in Central-European societies, politics and cultural evolutions. The author depicts in a comprehensive analysis the establishment of the communist regime, the development, the critical points and its collapse in the Soviet Bloc. The construction of a new society on Communist bases meant the monopoly of political power, a planned society, social equality, the creation of a new man, respectively of a new woman (1). A central part of her research is represented by analyzing the unintended consequences of the enforced control and regulations, coupled with specific dysfunctions arising from historical circumstances in each country, that have disrupted the viability of this utopian political system.

The diverse theoretical background revolves around three key aspects: (1) politics in its classical sense, examining power, policy, programs, and values; (2) cultural advancements with connections to visual arts, music, literature, etc.; and (3) societal dimensions, delving into areas such as the economy, religion, and women's rights. The examination emphasizes the contrasts between ideological claims and the challenges in realizing those ideals. It explores repressive measures aimed at eliminating opposition, attempts to reform the economic system, and the regime's responses to the growing economic crisis. The focus extends to changes in the cultural sphere and the emergence of resistance movements within society. Studies about the fall of Communism in East-Central Europe represent one of the main themes covered by political history studies, with an added focus during the past few years. An illustration

of this is the recently published book by David S. Mason.¹ Unlike Sabrina P. Ramet's work, Mason's volume has a less extensive timespan and does not employ the same methodological approaches.

The author uses the comparative approach in order to stress out the particularities, the similarities and the antagonistic characteristics of the communist regime in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, and German Democratic Republic (GDR). Furthermore, the author provides a comprehensive and well-documented timeline of significant historical events during the communist era in the Soviet Bloc, which has been less accessible until now. This chronology contributes significantly to the development of the main arguments in the study. Regarding methodology, the author asserts that functionalism stands out as the most effective tool for researchers in the social sciences to analyze the relationship between government policies and their unintended consequences (8).

The opening chapter starts by analyzing the communist regime, conceived as an ideal society based on hegemonic organization. This envisions a single party dominating the political, social, and cultural realms, striving for equality in rights for men and women and between classes, economic growth in an industrialized system, new cultural ideals. The author focuses on the six aforementioned countries and opts for Yugoslavia and Albania as case studies. This choice allows for the exploration of the dynamics between these communist nations that were not aligned with the USSR. She differentiates two types of communist leaders: on one hand the Muscovite wing, attached to the soviet model of leadership who lived in Moscow, and on the other hand the national communists, who lived in their countries, being more focused on the development of their homelands (14). She also points out the positioning of the church towards the communist parties which had evolved differently across the Soviet Bloc, as the sanctions imposed by the political regime were more or less severe, depending on each country.

Throughout the six chapters of the book, the author employs a division into five phases to trace the evolution of the communist regime

¹ David S. Mason, *Revolution in East-central Europe: The Rise and Fall of Communism and the Cold War*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis, 1992).

in the Soviet Bloc. In the first phase (1943/44-1948/49), the accent is on the installation of communism in a specific political and economic context. On November 29, 1943, the commencement of the communist era in Yugoslavia marked the beginning of a gradual expansion into the other six countries addressed in this volume (19). Following World War II, Poland faced economic and demographic devastation, and the Communists assumed legislative control following the 1947 elections (22). Hungary had a temporary non-communist government situated in Debrecen, while the Communists held influence in more crucial territories (25). In Czechoslovakia, a governmental crisis followed by a series of resignations among non-communist ministries gave the opportunity to vote a new constitution instrumentalized by the Communists in order to become the national leading force (28-29). Bulgarian Communists, organized in Fatherland Front, took control of the government and key institutions. Romania experienced a distinctive scenario with the formation of the Romanian Workers Party having resulted from a forced coalition (35). In the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the Red Army played a coercive role in the creation of the Socialist Unity Party, or SED (38).

The second phase (1948/49-1956) covers mainly the Stalinist era aiming to construct the socialist modernity, dominated by a state of terror, land collectivization, the setting-up of women's rights organizations, and at the same time, numerous trials, executions, imprisonments, in order to enforce authority and to eliminate inter-elite rivalries. The author notes that the ongoing conflict between the church and the state in Poland stems from violations of the agreement of non-interference by the state in its internal affairs, as well as the restrictions imposed or the promotion of atheism (60). On the contrary, in East Germany we find a more convenient situation for the Protestant Church because of its anti-fascist positioning, the social benefits brought by its hospitals, and the opportunity left by Stalin for the unification of the two German states. The chapter also develops on the evolutions regarding culture and ideology. As a general rule, the arts and literature were in all the countries legally forced to follow the patterns of the official socialist realism. That meant, for example, avoiding dissonances in music in favor of triumphant choral or formalism, or the representation of abstract figures in paintings.

The beginning of the third phase (1956-1971) was marked by an early economic growth followed in the 1960s by a slowdown, as the imperfections of the centralized system started to stand out, constraining the regime to develop reform plans. Moreover, this was accompanied by the monotony, the apathy or the open resistance in the society, all unintended consequences of the socialist realism doctrine. Thus, to preserve power, a set of liberalization measures had to be adopted, such as limiting the power of the state in setting economic policies or the beginning of privatization, the right to travel outside the national frontiers, closing forced labor camps, a reduced censorship, a relaxation in arts. Women become more visible in political and economic spheres, particularly at the local level, rather than occupying central decision-making positions. These measures instigated the Soviets, a phenomenon culminating with the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Romania was an exception, as the Communist leaders thought that liberalization could destabilize the regime. Ceaușescu also decided to distance the country from the Warsaw Pact, and claimed for neutrality in the Soviet Union – China dissensions (143). In Romania, the church cooperated with the regime in order to develop relations with the Western countries and the collective self (146, 147), while in Bulgaria the subsidies represented the main reason for this collaboration (151).

During the fourth phase (1971-1980), a constant degradation of living standards was experienced. The rising indebtedness toward Western countries created a sort of dependence. The legislation banning abortions affected the status and health of women, and gender inequality remained an obvious problem after decades of communism. Consequently, the bloc was shaken by protest movements, strikes, and the emergence of civic activism such as The Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Prosecuted, and Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia (164), or the Movement for the Defense of Human and Civil Rights in Poland (167). In this same period, Bulgaria started to build links with the West, while the Romanian exceptionalism is marked by Ceaușescu's admiration for Mao's cultural revolution, his tough coercive measures, and a rapprochement of the Non-Aligned Movement (172).

The last phase (1980-1989/90) marks the failure of an adventurous reform plan instituted because of the dysfunctional communist system, a

deepening economic crisis, the loss of confidence in the communist leadership, the dissemination of conflicting opinions towards the regime between intellectuals, political disintegration, and a growing frustration among citizens. The visible opposition was represented at various levels: political parties (the United Peasant Party and the Democratic Party which started to act independently in Poland) (201), journals (samizat journal *Beszélő* in Hungary) (209), independent organizations for environmental protection (this was the case in Bulgaria), or different manifestations in arts (like the apocalypse culture in rock music) (210-211). Solidarity activists in Poland orchestrated the underground opposition (204), emphasizing the significance of individual freedom, non-interference in the economy, and freedom of speech. In Romania, the underground opposition exhibited a more diverse and sporadic nature.

As for the two case studies, Yugoslavia and Albania, the author explains the communist regimes had basic resemblances with the rest of the Soviet Bloc, but Kremlin did not exercise an active role of control over their governments. The Anti-Fascist Council of the Peoples's Liberation of Yugoslavia (AVNOJ) reorganized Yugoslavia as a federation of republics based on ethnic criteria, which eventually split up after the fall of the Communist regime, as the unification ideals of Josip Broz Tito disappeared, and the decentralized system provided more power to the republics than to the central government (233). On the contrary, in Albania, the unstable economic system limited investments in development and research, and strong resistance to collectivization led to the gradual disintegration of communism (298-299).

In her comprehensive work, Sabrina P. Ramet constructs a comparative theoretical analysis that considers the political context and socio-cultural dimensions, employing a chronological approach. She establishes a holistic framework for understanding the nature of both intended and unintended consequences, illustrating how these factors contributed to the gradual collapse of the communist regime across the Soviet Bloc. What makes her publication valuable and original is the focus on the need to look for the impacts of what she calls "unintended consequences" which are operating in a latent form and are preponderantly neglected by the decision-makers in a state (6-7). According to the author's perspective, identifying unintended consequences in the context of a set

of government policies entails analyzing all components of society that either interfere with or are affected by a given policy.

From a critical standpoint, the author mentions from the beginning the use of functionalism to figure out the cause-and-effect relationship regarding the promulgated public policies by the communist political establishment. In the same time, taking into account the typology proposals of Patrick Baert, we affirm that this study explains the emergency of unintended consequences, but it does not provide a methodological framework in order to classify the dimensions and the types of effects encountered during every phase of communism.² Furthermore, the extensive literature review can outbalance the research, risking to become a historical narrative.

To conclude, in our point of view, the ultimate message of this volume lies in illustrating the destructive potential of both intended and unintended consequences of policies for a political regime. Thus, it highlights that prioritizing written ideology over pragmatic reality makes historical junctures consistently unpredictable.

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² Patrick Baert, "Unintended Consequences: a Typology and Examples," *International Sociology* 6, no. 2 (1991): 201-210.