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The 'end of politics' in Eastern Europe?
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The fall of the Berlin wall was a symbolic event marking the starting point for a series of radical social, political and economic transformations in the Slavic and Eastern European countries. The profound societal transformations should not be seen either as a result of the gradual unfolding of reason that finally leads us to 'the end of history' or as the result of the carefully calculated and wilful action of internal and external protagonists of change. The collapse of state socialism should rather be perceived as *dislocation* caused by the contingent accumulation of demands and events that could not be integrated, represented, or domesticated by the hegemonic discourse and which, therefore, led to a gradual erosion of the political, moral and intellectual leadership that holds together even the most inefficient and undemocratic societies.

The dislocation of state socialism opened a political terrain for struggles over hegemony. Since the symbolic order of the old regimes was falling apart, it could not determine the form and character of the new regimes that were going to replace them. The future was open and a host of nationalist, ethnic, religious, social-democratic and neo-liberal projects struggled to become hegemonic. Sometimes, when a societal dislocation goes deep down to the bottom of the social, economic and political structures, the mere *availability* of discourses promising to heal the rift in the dislocated structure seems to become more important than the actual content of the available discourses (Laclau, 1990). Hence, the profound lack of any order means that the mere promise of a new order becomes more important than the actual means by which this order is achieved. What counts in the face of an all-penetrating dislocation is the presence of discourses that offer a new imaginary that can function as a surface of inscription for all kinds of social and political hopes for a better and brighter future.

At the time of the dislocation of the political and economic regimes in Eastern Europe, the discourse of *neo-liberalism* had a strong grip on the western world. Neo-liberalism was not only a readily available political discourse, it also furnished a radical principle for reorganizing the economic and political order around the mythical notion of the 'free individual'. Inefficient plan economies and totalitarian political regimes, it was argued, should be replaced by capitalist market economies and liberal democracies founded on the sovereign individual. Neo-liberalism did not offer any detailed blue-print for economic or political reforms, but rather provided a totalizing discourse about individual autonomy, free choice and the efficiency gains obtained through deregulation and competition. It offered a radical rhetoric calling for the dismantling of repressive state structures and the reign of the free market in both economic and political life. As such, it is not surprising that the political passions and energies unleashed by the revolutionary events in many Eastern European countries were invested in the neo-liberal discourse that in many countries informed and guided economic and political reforms.

In the Western European countries we starred with a *narcissistic gaze* at the reforms in Eastern Europe that seemed to reinvent and celebrate the core values of the West in terms of the free market and the democratic demand for liberty and political equality. Despite the problems of mass unemployment and increasing political apathy, which were massively present in the Western European countries, the core values of the Western world were apparently still going strong, since why else would they be so obsessed with reproducing these values in Eastern Europe?

Neo-liberal reforms have unfolded in many countries in Eastern Europe. State bureaucracies have been dismantled, publicly owned industries have been privatized, new markets have been created, labour power has become commodified, democratic constitutions have been drafted, and institutions of liberal democracy have been formed. However, the neo-liberal attempts to create new commodity, capital and labour markets based on free competition and private appropriation of profits have failed to recognize that efficient markets are not a 'natural state of affairs' that emerges as soon as state ownership and state regulations are removed. The creation and functioning of a market economy requires constant *state interventions,* although of a different kind than those aiming to run a plan economy.

This is well recognized by the economists from the Austrian economic school who, in stark contrast to the Chicago school, claim that markets are social constructs and rely on a wide range of institutional and political regulations (Lemke, 2001).

The problem in many Eastern European countries, and probably most clearly evidenced by the Polish experience, is that the lack of state capacities, adequate state interventions and public welfare protection systems has resulted in malfunctioning markets, lack of investments, underperforming industries, unemployment, falling living standards and increasing social inequality. The promise of a new, well-functioning order capable of fulfilling the demands of large sectors of the population has not been kept. This has generated a general political discontent and stimulated the formation of more or less radical *protest movements* based on populist, nationalist and ethnic ideologies.

The surge of populist and nationalist movements and parties should not be seen as pre-modern relics that will be weeded out when liberal capitalism begins to improve its functioning. The populist and nationalist movements are *counter-hegemonic forces* aiming to provide political alternatives to the neo-liberal hegemony that suffers from a flawed conception of the political and institutional conditions of modern economic and public governance. In fact, populism and nationalism is an intrinsic element of liberal democracy. While facilitating political plurality and elite competition, the liberal democracies require that the hegemonic forces transgress their narrow corporatist interests and speak in the name of the people. Hence, it is impossible to occupy the empty space of power in liberal democracy without appealing to some totalizing notion of the people defined through the positing of a 'we' and a 'them'. It might be possible to replace the thick 'Gemeinschaft' based nationalism found in many Eastern-European countries with a more 'Gesellschaft' oriented nationalism, as the one that dominates the current EU discourse. However, liberal democracy necessarily provides a political terrain for competing attempts to construct and define 'the people', and in times with discontent with the ruling hegemony, populist and nationalist movements will tend to blossom as a way of expressing the frustrated demands of the population vis-à-vis the ruling elite.

Now, the experiences with regime change and policy reforms in Eastern Europe have provided rich opportunities for learning. Hence, today it is widely recognized that the transition to capitalism and liberal democracy, and the compensation of the problems associated with neo-liberalism, requires the formation of an interventionist state and the enhancement of its capacity for political steering. This recognition is reflected by the advancement of the discourse of *'good governance'* that is strongly promoted by organizations like the World Bank and the OECD. Good governance is a blanket concept that covers many different aspects. As such, good governance both includes legal, political, economic and participatory elements:

1) the enhancement of procedural reliability, the rule of law, the respect for human rights, and the regulation of arbitrary powers

2) the improvement of the management of public resources through increased transparency, control with expenditure and outcomes, and accountability of political and administrative leaders

3) the development and maintenance of a transparent and stable regulatory framework conducive to efficient private sector activities

4) a greater emphasis on fair and responsive inclusion of stakeholders in empowered participatory governance

The demands for good governance will be exacerbated by the integration of the Eastern European countries in the EU. Hence, the EU white paper on governance (2001) claims that good governance is a key to socioeconomic growth and prosperity. Good governance will permit the countries in Europe to reach the twin goals of increased structural competitiveness and enhanced social cohesion.

In the EU context there is much emphasis on new forms of governance that take us *beyond both hierarchical state regulation and competitive market regulation*. Hence, the 'visible hand' of the state and the 'invisible hand' of the market should be supplemented by the 'continuous handshake' of negotiated interaction in and through partnerships and governance networks.

Governance networks involve a stable articulation of interdependent, but operationally autonomous actors from state, market and civil society (Torfing, 2005). The social and political actors interact through negotiations that involve consultation, bargaining and deliberation. The negotiated interaction between the actors takes place within a self-regulated institutional framework and contributes to the production of public policy and governance. However, network governance always takes place in the 'shadow of hierarchy', as Fritz Scharpf puts it. Hence, public authorities at various levels will aim to regulate the relatively self-regulating governance networks. The regulation of self-regulating governance networks is known in the literature as 'metagovernance' and involves design of networks, formulation of the overall goals and framework, process management, and direct participation by politicians and administrators.

Networks and partnerships are *particularly suited* for public governance in situations where the policy problem is ill-defined, the solution is complex and uncertain, specialized knowledge is required, there are many stakeholders, and the conflict potential is large. In fact, in such situations network governance might be the only way ahead. Governance networks are generally praised for their ability to producing proactive and flexible policy solutions; enhancing the knowledge basis of political decisions; bringing together the relevant and affected actors; generating trust; empowering the citizens; and facilitating the formation of consensus and compromise.

It is a good question whether partnerships and networks will be welcomed and have a future in the Eastern European countries where network governance might be associated with either the informal rule of the old cliques and elites, or the unchecked political influence of business tycoons and organized crime syndicates. On the other hand, in countries where the people wants solutions to a series of fundamental problems while distrusting each other and the political institutions of government, the involvement of interest organizations, civil society associations and citizens groups in interactive network governance might provide a means for enhancing the *problem solving capacity*.

Governance through partnerships and networks is a part of a new *governmentality* that favours 'governance at a distance' through the mobilization of the resources, knowledge and energies of non-state actors within a framework ensuring conformity with the general objectives of the government. As Nikolas Rose (1999) notes, governance increasingly involves 'the shaping of freedom'. Rather than governing through sovereign rule or disciplinary mechanisms, the state might enhance its power and reach through the responsible involvement of free actors in the production of policy outputs and policy outcomes. In this context, governance networks can be seen as a new way of governing that allows the state to drop the reins while maintaining control.

However, the expanding discourse on governance - which is also reflected in the literature on global governance - is pervaded by the belief that partnerships and networks will facilitate a *pragmatic, technocratic and consensus-based policy making*. Formal and informal governance networks are formed around particular policy problems and aim to enhance the problem solving capacity on the basis of pragmatic concerns for feasibility. In addition, governance networks include stakeholders who hold important strategic resources and have a certain expertise in the field. Finally, the telos of governance networks is to facilitate negative or positive coordination based on consensus-oriented deliberation.

The problem is that such beliefs in pragmatic and technocratic governance through democratic deliberation nurture and support the *post-political vision* of governance and democracy which we find in Third Way politics and within certain strands of political sociology (Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens) and cosmopolitan democracy (David Held and Daniele Archibugi).

The post-political vision of governance and democracy *denies the antagonistic character of politics* which stems from the fact that the political decisions taken in an open and non-totalizable terrain always involve acts of exclusion and the formation of friend-enemy divisions. The post-political vision sees politics as a matter of a reasoned debate that leads to mutual understanding and consensual solutions. Left-right cleavages are claimed to be old fashioned, and politics and democracy are claimed to have become dialogical rather than adversarial.

According to Chantal Mouffe (2005), the post-political vision is *highly problematic* since the elimination of political antagonism from the political and democratic space will tend to stimulate the rise of right-wing populism and militant groups that are based on moral antagonisms that cannot be democratically negotiated and therefore tend to undermine democracy. Hence, whilst the protagonists of a post-political deliberative democracy aim to strengthen democracy by suppressing antagonist conflicts and clashes, they end up strengthening anti-democratic forces who cannot find outlet for their frustrated demands and political passions in the field of democratic politics in which there is only room for reasoned debate and consensus-oriented deliberation.

Certainly, the *alternative to the post-political vision* is not to stimulate the proliferation of violent antagonistic struggles or insurmountable political conflicts, but rather to turn antagonism into 'agonism'. Hence, instead of viewing each others as 'enemies' to be destroyed, or eliminated, in the course of struggle, the political actors engaged in local, regional and national governance networks should conceive each other as 'adversaries' that may disagree on substantial issues, but agree to tolerate each other's right to argue their case and to engage in conflict-ridden policy negotiations where the common good is neither the starting nor the end point of deliberation. The political adversaries within an agonistic democracy should include all the relevant and affected actors in their network-based deliberations, even those who are not articulate, dispassionate and completely rational. The only demand to the included actors is that they should be willing to listen to each other and to respond to each other in a way that is compatible with the democratic demands for liberty and equality that prevail in plural democracies.

The notion of *agonistic democracy* advanced by Bill Connolly (1991) and Chantal Mouffe (1993) places political conflicts at the heart of democratic governance. A vibrant democracy cannot live without agonistic struggles. This a lesson which is important not only for the attempt to enhance the governance capacities in Eastern Europe through the creation of governance networks at all levels of society, but for governance reforms in all the countries in the new, enlarged Europe.

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[1] This paper was presented at the 90th Anniversary Conference at the School of Slavonic and Eastern European Studies in London, October 2005.