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Special issue: Two decades of transformation

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PERSPECTIVES ON TRANSFORMATION

Alicja Stępień-Kuczyńska, Maciej Potz

The process of system transformation in Central-Eastern Europe has long drawn the attention of scholars from various backgrounds: sociologists, political scientists, economists, historians. The continued interest in the subject is perhaps due to the fact that even now, more than twenty years since the symbolic date of 1989 – the fall of communism in Poland – the transformation is not over. Obviously, this is not equally true of all aspects of the process. For example, political transition – the dismantling or deep reconstruction of political institutions on the way from authoritarianism to democracy – constituted the initial phase of transformation in the majority of the region's countries and was, for the most part, successfully concluded within a decade. Quite naturally, profound social changes, such as the emergence of civic political culture or, in the case of the former USSR republics, the building of national identity, take much longer to occur. The economic transformation may be quite dynamic, especially when it takes the form of “shock therapy”, but the positive effects – which, in turn, generate social support for the institutional changes – are often less rapid and unevenly distributed.

The four articles in this special issue of “*International Studies*” present different perspectives on the processes of transformation. Larissa Titarenko tackles the difficult topic of the national identity of contemporary Belarusians. Contrary to the popular view founded on the sharp dichotomy of the post-Soviet regime leaning towards Russia and the oppressed pro-Western, Belarusian-speaking society, she shows a much more complex picture. Both the Soviet and the nationalist options are in fact minority choices of, respectively, the regime and a relatively isolated group of intellectuals, while the majority has still to come to terms with conflicting historical, cultural and ethnic identities.

Paweł Bożyk takes on board economic aspects of the process, showing the ups and downs of the rapid transformation and its impact on countries' (Poland and Russia in this case) economic relations. The major question, of course, is the validity of the route to capitalism (especially in its liberal, rather than welfare, form) modelled, to a large extent, on western democracies, as applied to a very different political, social and economic environment.

The article by Ryszard Zięba situates the Polish transformation experience in the international context and discusses the successful accomplishment of the country's foreign policy priorities. The road has led from the normative agreement (accession to the Coun-

cil of Europe) through common security structure (joining NATO) to economic integration (joining the EU in 2004).

Finally, Agata Włodarska's contribution is a case study of an ethnic-based political conflict in post-Soviet territory. History took an unexpected turn when Russians suddenly became a low-status minority in Estonia, when Estonians, asserting their freshly regained independence, made language the criterion of citizenship.

Within the same broad subject area, the issue also contains the highlights of a round table meeting of Polish and Russian political scientists, hosted in February 2010 by the University of Lodz. The debate was a follow-up to an international conference "20 Years of Transformation" organized in November 2009 by the Department of Political Systems of the same university.