

'Democracy is something we have to learn' from Der Spiegel (5 February 1990)

Caption: On 5 February 1990, the German weekly magazine Der Spiegel describes the scepticism felt by the people of the countries of Eastern Europe after the fall of Communism and the political parties' transition towards Social Democracy.

Source: Der Spiegel. Das Deutsche Nachrichten-Magazin. Hrsg. AUGSTEIN, Rudolf ; Herausgeber FUNK, Werner; KILZ, Hans Werner. 05.02.1990, n° 6; 44. Jg. Hamburg: Spiegel Verlag Rudolf Augstein GmbH. "Demokratie müssen wir lernen", p. 162-166.

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'Democracy is something we have to learn'

Although the Communist Party of the Soviet Union still clings tightly to its monopoly of power its sister parties throughout the eastern bloc have loosened their grip. They are changing their names and their leaders and are keen to become 'Social Democrats'. Popular reaction in the countries concerned is one of mistrust and wariness of 'Communism in disguise'.

'The devil has donned his vestments and is ringing the church bell with his tail.' Reformed Communist Tomasz Nalecz came up with this quote from classic Polish author Henryk Sienkiewicz at the congress of the 'Polish United Workers' Party' (PUWP) last Sunday night as he disparaged the feverish efforts of party strategists to give the ailing Communists a new name and a makeover.

The PUWP — sole political power in Poland for 41 years — was successfully laid to rest, but the desired metamorphosis did not take place.

At the municipal elections in April not one united party of reborn Social Democrats but rather three, or more likely four, social democratic splinter groups will present themselves to the electorate as the contrite heirs to the hastily buried PUWP.

A majority of former top-ranking party officials, including Poland's President, Wojciech Jaruzelski, the last four PUWP Ministers in the cabinet of Premier Tadeusz Mazowiecki, of Solidarity, and 116 Members of Parliament, actually prefer to remain independent, in the hope that Polish voters will forget their decades of zealous activity on behalf of the Communists.

Poland's Communist Party is not alone in its demise. In the space of barely six months the dismal buildings of state Communism — strongholds of a party-driven ideology that only a year ago seemed impenetrable throughout central and eastern Europe — have toppled into the so-called Socialist camp.

From the annihilation of the Polish Communists in last June's elections to the bloody reckoning with the totalitarian despotism of megalomaniac Nicolae Ceausescu in December, and from the 'Wende' in the GDR to German reunification in January, the people's will to be free has forced an end to the old *status quo* in Europe.

Self-proclaimed anti-Communists, like President Václav Havel in Czechoslovakia and Prime Minister Mazowiecki in Poland, have moved into top political positions.

Not one of the all-powerful party leaders of last year remains in post: Romania's Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife Elena, who regarded the people of their country as serfs, were executed by a firing squad.

Bulgaria's Todor Schiwkoff is in prison awaiting trial for abuse of power, and in the GDR former SED boss Erich Honecker (who faces charges including high treason) has been spared imprisonment only because he is seriously ill.

The former Czechoslovakian party leader Milos Jakes and former Head of State Gustáv Husák got off lightly: stripped of influence, they will be able to reflect on their political mistakes as they draw their pension.

Károly Grósz, who took over from the since deceased Janos Kádár in Hungary as recently as May 1988 — after the country had been brought to the brink of economic ruin — had his democratic aims rejected as half-hearted.

His politically agile Polish colleague Mieczyslaw Rakowski, having survived numerous changes of course over more than 30 years, gave up in disappointment when he found he was no longer trusted by his former comrades.

Mountains of books, documents and tracts lauding Communism as the one true road to salvation, or at least as an unquestionable science, are now merely so much waste paper. In every country of the tumbledown eastern bloc, the Communist Party — once likened by Rosa Luxemburg to humanity itself in the sense that it was not something one could leave — has relinquished the leadership role constitutionally ascribed to it. It has assumed new names and new programmes in an effort to avoid a day of reckoning with the people.

Almost half of the party's 11 million or so registered members in eastern Europe (excluding the Soviet Union) have left in outrage or disappointment, and more are quitting every day. With the rank and file deserting on mass and senior leadership figures being fired, what remains is a rickety tier of officialdom, those middle-ranking party functionaries whose task it is to keep the wheels of state and the economy turning.

Among the public, however, there is a phobic reaction — at times incomprehensible to Western observers — to every reminder of socialism as a reality of life.

In Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland the last remaining monuments to Stalin and indeed Lenin have been toppled, and the red star symbols of the Communist Party have been hauled down from the rooftops. Even at the historic Lenin Shipyard in Danzig, birthplace of the independent trade union Solidarity, the word 'Lenin' has been deleted from the name above the entrance gate.

Every emblem recalling the days of bondage has been excised from municipal coats of arms, and soldiers and police officers sport new crests on their berets.

The former People's Republics of Hungary and Poland have decided to drop the distasteful term 'People's' from their names, and the word 'Socialist' has become superfluous to requirements in the Czechoslovakian Socialist Republic. According to President Havel, 'There is to be no reminder of the era we have left behind.'

To address someone as 'comrade' is now suspect, even among the new socialists and social democrats. In the GDR, founding committees of the German Socialist Party (SPD) sent information sheets back to the well-meaning West German campaign aides who had donated them, because they featured the party's official colour, and 'People in the GDR react to red in much the same way as bulls.' In Leipzig and Dresden, even though flowers are in short supply, there is no longer a market for red carnations.

On the other hand, the mass exodus of Communists into the Social Democratic camp is well thought out and springs from cool-headed calculation by party strategists.

For when Communist and Socialist parties in eastern Europe were merged after 1945 on Moscow's orders, Social Democrats became part of the new 'workers' parties'. The strategists reckon that in the new era Communist parties may avoid annihilation by taking over Social Democrat political positions and re-branding themselves — although the public is not always prepared to go along.

Hungary's reformed Communists, for example, were guilty of a miscalculation at their party conference in early October when they dissolved the heavily discredited Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (HSWP) and founded the reformist 'Hungarian Socialist Party' (HSP) to replace it.

As a tactical manoeuvre to oust diehards and deadweights from the political scene, it misfired. Out of more than 800 000 HSWP members, only 60 000 switched their allegiance to the reformist party, while 65 000 announced in December that they refused to recognise the HSWP's dissolution.

The reformist leadership centred around Rezső Nyers (66), head of both the old and new parties, and Minister of State Imre Pozsgay (56) has also hit stormy waters in the run-up to the parliamentary elections in March.

Interior Minister István Horváth, a democratic socialist figurehead, lost his job in the wake of a secret-service bugging scandal uncovered by the non-Communist Opposition. And the reform-minded trade unions

have mounted street demonstrations against the government in protest at rising prices.

An attempt by Polish Communist Party boss Rakowski to forge a strong new party of the left from the reformist wing of the PUWP and progressive forces within the Solidarity movement also seems to have de-railed.

The idea was supported by no less a person than workers' leader Lech Walesa, who declared with his own inimitable use of imagery that 'A man needs a right foot and a left foot, and the same goes for Poland.'

Yet, contrary to expectations, at the party conference the weekend before last scarcely 200 of the 1 700 delegates were prepared to support former Danzig party boss Tadeusz Fiszbach (54), a close friend of Walesa, in setting up a 'Social Democratic Union of the Republic of Poland'.

A majority opted to join 'Social Democracy of the Republic of Poland' under the leadership of former Communist Youth Minister Aleksander Kwasniewski (35). The party newsletter *Trybuna ludu* (the 'People's Tribune') also had to change its name to *Trybuna kongresowa*.

Given that the heirs to the disbanded Communist Party also include the 'Working People's Movement', founded by trade union leader and loyal Communist Alfred Miodowicz, which has ambitions of its own, and that a 'Socialist Party' set up by Professor Jan Lipski has also been in existence for some time, voters at the April elections may well find themselves playing 'spot the difference'.

At least the electorate in the GDR will have an easier time in this respect. The SED, the run-down party of the state, has tried twice since last November to recover ground by changing its name, and by the time the country goes to the polls for its first secret ballot on 18 March it should be unrecognisable under the title of 'Party of Democratic Socialism' (PDS).

In response to uneasy grassroots members who wanted to follow the Polish example and dissolve the SED completely, party leader Gregor Gysi (41) made the memorable observation that 'Once the party is dissolved, it will be gone.'

Former SED member and Mayor of Dresden Wolfgang Berghofer has no illusions about the party's chances at the poll but he believes that defeat could be salutary: 'Only in opposition can the SED renew itself with any degree of credibility.'

One reason why the Communist parties have found it hard to part with their now discredited names is the fact of their considerable wealth. They are the proprietors of companies, real estate, holiday homes, leisure complexes, hotels, specialist shops, official cars and service outlets, which were formerly available for comrades' use according to their party rank.

Experts cannot even estimate the value of all this because in the days of dictatorship the parties operated according to the simple maxim that public property was state property, the state was the party, and supplying information about its assets could be helpful only to enemies of the people.

As a result it is rare for the Communists to be listed as property owners in commercial and land registers — so the lawyers whose function it is to shed light on the situation face a near impossible task of decartelisation.

In Hungary and the GDR the re-treaded parties of the state have at least been prepared to assign to their newly founded rivals some of the rights of use that the latter claim. In Poland people have helped themselves: more than 200 party-owned properties in 20 towns and cities have been occupied and converted into student housing, day nurseries or hospitals.

In Czechoslovakia, by contrast, much remains as it was. Although there has been a change of government and, as of last week, the Communist Party has lost its parliamentary majority as a result of by-elections,

party structures throughout the country are still in place.

None of the party officials responsible, before the Velvet Revolution last November, for the repressive policies of the state has been arrested. This reflects magnanimity particularly on the part of new President Václav Havel (53) who, as a victim of political persecution himself, spent a total of more than five years in jail. Havel, the first non-Communist incumbent of Prague Castle since 1948, declared on taking office: 'We are not out to settle scores.'

Whether such a strategy will succeed remains to be seen. Rumours circulating in Prague of a planned putsch by sacked Communist Party officials and former secret service officers have been denied by Interior Minister Richard Sacher as 'provocation' and 'disinformation'.

In Bulgaria the Party is attempting to adjust to the new situation. On Thursday the Communist Government of Premier Georgi Atanassoff (56) resigned en bloc in the face of public pressure to make way for a 'democratically based cabinet'. On Friday, reformer Alexander Liloff (56) was elected as the new party leader.

Petar Mladenoff (53), who led the successful coup d'état in Bulgaria and remains head of state, also wants to hold on to Marxism. Many Bulgarians share his fear that 'placing power in the hands of private property' would be a recipe for 'social upheaval, mass unemployment and anarchy'.

At least the Bulgarian comrades have accepted decisions taken at the round table talks and have relinquished control over the army and police.

In Romania no Communist Party will actually be taking part in the country's first free elections in May. The mass-membership party — one Romanian in three carried a party card, voluntarily or otherwise — has been neither banned nor officially dissolved. During December's bloody upheavals it simply slipped out of sight, fearful of popular vengeance.

This only serves to increase people's anxiety that a form of 'Communism in disguise' could emerge under a new name. It is an anxiety directed against, among others, the self-appointed executors of the Communist estate, the 'Front for National Salvation'.

Bucharest discovered last weekend just how well founded such mistrust is. On the day after a mass demonstration — involving mainly students but also supporters of the newly founded Farmers' Party, Liberal Party and Social Democratic Party — calling for the leader of the Front to quit, entire workforces took to the streets to celebrate the Front and protest against the protest. 'It was just like in Ceausescu's day!' commented one student. Only with difficulty did the army manage to prevent the demonstrators from torching opposition parties' headquarters. Marius Carciumaru, leader of the Democratic Socialists, reflected afterwards that 'Democracy and tolerance are things we have to learn.'

Meanwhile the assault against Communist dictatorship has rebounded on the man who, with his perestroika, triggered the whole process — Russian head of state and Communist Party leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

As recently as last autumn he had said there was no need for a multi-party system in the Soviet Union. Then during his brief and unsuccessful attempt to patch things up with Lithuania's separatist Communist Party he admitted that: 'Having more than one party would not be disastrous.'

At the same time there have been clashes in Moscow over the question of deleting Article 6 of the Soviet Constitution, concerning the Communist Party's role as the leading power in the state. A social democratic fraction in the Supreme Soviet has already tabled a list of demands. And on Thursday the official newspaper *Pravda* ventured the opinion that, in debate this week about the party's future course, a split could no longer be ruled out.

So far have things progressed in the Red Empire that a return to the totalitarianism of one-party rule is

scarcely imaginable — the mismanagement and glaring failures of the old parties are all too clearly evident. Today not even the military might of a dashing Soviet general — should such a person come to power — would be enough to bring the entire eastern bloc to its senses.

Meanwhile, in the European Parliament in Strasbourg last week Polish Premier Mazowiecki, who knows what he is talking about, warned against the danger of losing newly won ground. 'We have not achieved democracy,' he said. 'Reactionary forces in the socialist states are still strong enough to defeat democracy again, especially in those countries where the reformers want too much all at once.'