ROUTLEDGE

Interwar East Central Europe, 1918–1941

The Failure of Democracy-building, the Fate of Minorities

EDITED BY SABRINA P. RAMET

INTERWAR EAST CENTRAL EUROPE, 1918–1941

This monograph focuses on the challenges that interwar regimes faced and how they coped with them in the aftermath of World War One, focusing especially on the failure to establish and stabilize democratic regimes, as well as on the fate of ethnic and religious minorities. Topics explored include the political systems and how they changed during the two decades under review, land reform, Church–state relations, and culture. Countries studied include Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania.

Sabrina P. Ramet is Professor Emerita of Political Science at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), in Trondheim, Norway.

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ROUTLEDGE
Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2020
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record has been requested for this book

ISBN: 978-0-367-13570-6 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-0-367-13571-3 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-0-429-02722-2 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Taylor & Francis Books

Cover image: Marshal Piłsudski entering Warsaw on 12 May 1926 at the start of his coup © Alamy Stock Photo

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AFTERWORD

Stefano Bianchini

Assessing the democracy-building process in interwar East Central Europe and the causes of its failure is not an easy task. Indeed, a high level of complexity marked developments across just 20 years. The reconstruction of the key policies, challenges, events, and trends in the region has been the main focus of the chapters of this book. The authors approached the topic either by analyzing the situation in their respective countries or by stressing transnational and cross-cutting interactions. In so doing, they have persistently highlighted the variety of nuances and interpretations that are still debated by scholars, in the media, and in political arenas. Thus, in the lines that follow I will try to capture some long-lasting regional dynamics (with their far-reaching consequences) that characterized the East Central European painful, and limited, process of democratization in the interwar years.

On the one hand, as emphasized in the book, several factors need to be considered. First and foremost, the perspective of democracy-building depended to a large extent on the clash between increasingly radical social demands and the fierce resistance to them. Additionally, the potential implementation of democracy suffered from the long-lasting confrontation of local and international economic interests, the diversities of cultural and psychological postwar legacies and the wide spectrum of political orientations (from reactionary to revolutionary activisms), which powerfully came to light at the end of World War One.

On the other hand, these factors were deeply affected by the (largely unexpected) geopolitical upheavals that occurred during the last year of the war. Furthermore, and to make the picture more complicated, even the end of the hostilities varied remarkably, according to the circumstances. Formally, as is known, scholars have associated the end of World War One with 11 November 1918. However, this was not true for East Central Europe, where military

actions were prolonged, in a number of situations, at least until 1921, if not 1923. Consequently, most of their eastern borders were not defined during the Paris Peace Conference, but only later, as a consequence of new peace treaties signed bilaterally by the parties involved.[1]

Moreover, unlike Western Europe, whose borders changed little (with the exception of the United Kingdom, which plunged into a bitter war in Ireland from 1919 to 1921), the whole East Central European map was radically modified after 1918. De facto, no state that had existed before 1914 survived, apart from Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania, whose territories were adjusted. Four East Central European and Near Eastern empires dissolved, new countries emerged (Poland, Czechoslovakia, the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, without speaking of Finland and the three Baltic republics), Romania more than doubled in size, while Hungary became independent, but under very constricted borders. A few other territories experienced a short-lived independence, such as the Italian Regency of Carnaro (Fiume) annexed to Italy in 1920, the Soviet Slovak Republic, quickly incorporated into Czechoslovakia, or the West Ukrainian National Republic, absorbed by Poland (with other similar cases in the territory of the defunct Russian Empire and in Anatolia).

This profound transformation was, unmistakably, the outcome of the war, which wiped out the memory of the "La Belle Époque," an era that started in the late 1870s. Marked by urbanization, innovations in art, scientific and technological advances, and comprehensive progress in social, cultural, and economic terms, it also had a dark side, with growing social inequalities, collective discrepancies, the expansion of imperialism with a precarious (and confrontational) balance of powers. In the end, a few years of ferocious hostilities triggered an extraordinary change accelerator, and the world has never been the same again.

Such a transformative acceleration affected in particular East Central Europe, as the result not only of war fatigue, stemming from the seemingly endless military campaigns,[2] their brutality, and the high number of casualties, but also from the popular impact produced by two main political aspirations. Indeed, their origins were rooted in the public and sometimes illegal debates of the previous decades, but their profiles acquired a peculiar strength from 1917 onward. These aspirations were connected to the desires for self-determination and land redistribution to the benefit of small landowners, freed serfs, and farmworkers.

Nurtured mounting plots, various conspiracies, and riots for a long time and debated in a variety of circles, demands for self-determination were ignited Europe-wide by Bolshevik revolutionary Vladimir Ilych Lenin, as soon as the Russian revolution erupted, and they were epitomized by his "Declaration of the rights of the peoples of Russia" of 2 (15) November 1917. The document unequivocally declared the right of secession and was implemented, without delay, by Finland whose independence was formally recognized by Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin on 18 (31) December 1917.[3] In the fall of the same year, in the USA, President Woodrow Wilson had established the

House Inquiry to determine conditions and criteria for ethno-national borders in Europe, respecting – in his view – the rights of peoples as a crucial prerequisite for a stable peace. Sharply advised against the notion of self-determination by his secretary of state Robert Lansing and his Western Allies, Wilson did not include the word in his famous 14 points of January 1918, but mentioned it soon thereafter in an address to Congress, because of his deep concern about the impact of Bolshevik ideas – especially that they could overflow into Central Europe, taking advantage, in particular, of the ethno-national fragility of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In this event, the possibility that desires for independence could transmit both socialist ideas and a revolutionary feeling in an exhausted Europe, encouraged the US president to outline, by contrast, an alternative approach to the rights of nations, regardless of British, Italian, and French fears about the effects on their respective colonial empires.[4]

Similarly, the decree on land, issued by the Bolsheviks on 26 October (8 November) 1917 as soon as they took over power in Petrograd, was immediately perceived all over Europe as a dangerous threat to the stability of the existing social systems as well as to the Allied and Central Powers' war efforts, since the majority of the soldiers were peasants. Tired of fighting, and attracted by the potential redistribution of lands, especially in East Central Europe where large estates still dominated the countryside, most of the conscripts could have been encouraged to desert in droves, affecting the social control of the militarized elites of the belligerent countries. The growing role of peasant parties, some of them led by pacifist leaders (as in the Bulgarian case) could have contributed to multiply defeatist behaviors, even if these parties were not inclined to interact or cooperate with the Bolsheviks.

Alarmed by the acceleration of these events, Europe's warring governments came to fear revolutionary scenarios, where alternative options relating to new geopolitical arrangements or radically social instances, or both, could have produced uncontrollable turbulence and disorder, seriously affecting the power of the landed aristocracy and the financial and industrial bourgeoisie. By contrast, military life, with its authoritarian and hierarchical organization, including the exemplary shootings of deserters, appeared to be, at least potentially, a fascinating dampening solution for reactionary circles. In particular, extreme right movements, together with some conservative components of European politics, felt encouraged by the long war experience, which had affected the prewar civil organization of society. Therefore, they were convinced that its implementation deserved to be explored.

It was against this pressing background that the East Central European institutional framework suddenly, and quickly, collapsed at the end of 1918. Assertive national elites demanded the establishment of new states by suggesting a variety of plans, often mutually conflicting (I will come back to this issue later). At the same time, the risks of revolutionary uprisings were indeed real, despite the beginning of a civil war in Russia. Consequently, at the end

of 1918, both the winning and vanquished alliances were facing a deeply different context in comparison to their expectations. A mix of thoughts marked their behaviors: from euphoria to disillusionment, from triumphant feelings to fears, from resentments to punishments, from animosities to feelings of indignation. As a result, while a new geopolitical order was designed during the Paris Peace Conference, although with little consensus among the participant delegations and limited, if not irritating results, it is appropriate to raise the question about what forms of democracy-building could have been initiated under these conditions in East Central Europe.

This is, in fact, a crucial issue that, to a large extent, needs to be explored in detail, viz. the weaknesses of the democracy-building experience in the area of our scrutiny and, at the end of the day, the reasons for its short length.

A few decades later, the famous sociologist Joseph Schumpeter, discussing the construction of democracy, made a distinction between the minimalist and maximalist perspective of this concept.[5] Other authors later contributed to develop this articulation, as for example Karl Schmitter, Georg Sorensen, Robert Dahl, and Larry Diamond.[6] Basically, the minimalist approach was restricted to free and fair elections with the possibility for the population to check how political power and governance would be implemented, avoiding wrongdoing if possible. By contrast, the maximalist approach encompassed more substantial democratic procedures beyond the electoral dimension, by reinforcing inclusive political participation, the respect of civil and social rights, the guarantees for liberties and minority rights, and a high level of competition.

Sociologists and political scientists have discussed this topic for decades.[7] Although this is not the place for further theoretical investigations, the general setting of such an important debate is useful for understanding the dynamics and limitations of the parliamentary systems in interwar East Central Europe. In particular, the complexity of the historical background sketched above highlights why, to a large extent, the countries under scrutiny limited their interwar efforts to the minimalist approach, though not without further restrictions and authoritarian solutions in the years to come.

In fact, scrolling through the pages of this book and looking comparatively at the chapters' narratives, one can easily understand why, once multiparty elections were provided and at least a male suffrage applied, the democracy-building process failed to consolidate its institutions. Stabilization, whatever the word might mean, occurred in the whole region only after 1923. This was the year when all revolutionary attempts across Europe were (at least temporarily) crushed with (1) the failure of the communist uprisings in Bulgaria and Hamburg, (2) the overthrow of the most radical peasant reformist government with Stamboliyski's murder, and (3) the end of the Greek–Turkish war in Anatolia and Eastern Thrace, which led to the Treaty of Lausanne (24 July 1923) and a negotiated ethnic cleansing between Greece and Turkey (although, this last event is geographically marginal to the area analyzed within this book, its regional legacy is nonetheless relevant).

Moreover, the chaotic developments that marked the first years after the formal conclusion of World War One were not necessarily linked to social uprisings only. Certainly, the fear that the Bolshevik revolution could spread to Central Europe was nurtured by the Spartacist uprising in Germany, the soviet republics in Hungary and Slovakia, the surprisingly good electoral results of the Yugoslav communists in 1920, the Red Biennium in Italy, and finally the decision of Marshal Mikhail Nikolayevich Tukhachevsky to cross the Curzon line in the war with Poland, assuming that the Red Army would have inflamed again the revolutionary spirits in Central Europe, while in Moscow a passionate 2nd Conference of the Comintern was taking place.[8] Still, all these attempts failed, leaving the Bolsheviks isolated, despite their victory in the Russian civil war. However, the fear of communism did not diminish at all in East Central Europe, whose governments – with few exceptions – banned the communist parties and controlled the unions, because they were suspected of being under the influence of communists or even seeking to replace the party by surreptitious means.

Moreover, the alarm of the ruling classes was quickly extended to any potential risk of social change, which involved the peasant movements as well, since the demands for agrarian reforms with the redistribution of land affected the great landowners, the aristocracy (particularly in Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania), and also the traditional prewar party system.

In fact, the introduction of the general suffrage, even when limited to the male component of society, could have potentially transferred the political control of the parliament to newly established mass movements and, among these, the peasant parties. In particular, the programs of the latter (although often mutually incompatible) advocated a leading role in the society by appealing to a "third way" between capitalism and socialism. This approach was, in essence, based on the alleged moral integrity of the rural world, a control of nature with environmental protection, and self-sufficiency stemming from the prioritization of agricultural production. In other words, peasant parties outlined a "rural predominance" over the urban areas and the banking and insurance services, as well as the development of industrialization, which should have been in harmony with the needs of the countryside.

Rarely, as stressed in the chapters of this book, did the peasant parties manage to come to power, and when this happened it did not last for long, with the exception of Czechoslovakia. However, the peasant parties created their own "Green International" on Stamboliyski's initiative. And even if this organization acquired a certain vitality only at the end of the 1920s, the Bolsheviks felt themselves encouraged to establish the "Krestintern," the so called "Red-Green International," in order to compete, and possibly replace, the "Green International," particularly after Stamboliyski's assassination.[9]

Despite the ideological reluctance on the part of communist activists, the "New Economic Policy" in the USSR gave popularity to the worker–peasant alliance put forward by Karl Berngardovich Radek and, later, Nikolay Ivanovich Bukharin.

Consequently, some contacts between the two movements occurred in the middle of the 1920s, particularly when the leader of the Croatian Peasant Party, Stjepan Radić, paid a long visit to the USSR, had his party join the Krestintern, and praised the Soviet agrarian law in public statements and articles. The ambiguity of the Bolshevik–Agrarian relations came to a zenith when the Soviet leadership, with whom Radić frequently met during his trip, offered him the leadership of the Krestintern. The proposal did not lead to anything, however, since Radić's national agenda did not meet the social priorities of Bolsheviks (whose activists continued to give vent to their ideological prejudices against the countryside), but once home, he was immediately arrested. After roughly a year in prison, his release in July 1925 occurred when he distanced himself from the Bolsheviks, abandoned republicanism, and softened the radical program of his party. At that point, he could also be included in the government.[10]

As a result, despite their predominant anti-communist orientation or, at least, their advocacy of an autonomous and self-directed role, the peasant parties in East Central Europe, with their mass organization and their radical demands for agrarian reforms at the beginning of the 1920s, represented a source of serious concern for the bourgeoisie, the still-alive aristocracy, the landowners, the financial capital and also, in some cases, the religious hierarchies. Inevitably, the prewar elites and the urban middle-class conformists expressed growing mistrust of such popular movements. Their conservativism quickly radicalized, even at the expense of affecting state governance, with consensus about the state institutions sharply declining among the populations, when inclusive democratic policies were abandoned or rejected as reactions of fear against the revolutionary movements occurred between 1919 and 1923. In a variety of situations (for example in Hungary, in Yugoslavia, in Bulgaria, and Romania) right-wing extremism flourished. The phenomena of "White Terror" and squad violence added fuel to social insecurity. Meanwhile, nostalgia for the military hierarchical order intensified among reactionary and conservative forces, who started to see it as a useful tool for controlling mass consensus. Italian fascism, and particularly its corporatist ideology, soon became an additional source of inspiration.

Admittedly, under these conditions, it was virtually impossible to proceed with the consolidation of democratic institutions, once the minimalist approach to democracy-building was initiated. Since the beginning, in fact, the limitations to the development of democracy stemmed not solely from fears of uncontrolled mass movements, potential revolutions, and "social disorder," but also from other factors that contributed to this outcome.[11]

For example, the relevance of war trauma is mentioned in this book. Peace trauma should be added, since not only the memory of conflict brutality, but also the postwar arrangements of borders and new state recognitions were perceived differently by national elites and local populations, encouraging opposite feelings, that is mutual animosities and, in particular, resentment against national minorities or unconfident feelings toward ethnic majorities.

Furthermore, the uncertainties of the borders and territorial delimitations prolonged a sense of insecurity that had become rooted during the war years. In addition, antagonistic state-building projects were supported by different elites, who were consequently attracted by alternative forms of governance.

The postwar upheavals required, for example, the establishment of standardized laws and regulations, new compatibilities in the communication systems, a reorganization of local and national services, in order to replace the fragmentation of the preexisting social, administrative, and a new infrastructural framework. However, the new governments (often provisional, sometimes recently elected) were expected to provide channels for managing these potentially conflicting needs in a productive way, under new geopolitical structures. This behavior would have also implied an enhanced dialogue with national minorities, in order to achieve a solid confidence in the new institutions, and to apply in some cases a policy of reconciliation, therefore overcoming the legacies of the war.[12]

Nevertheless, and despite either the recommendations included in a number of specific treaties signed at the Paris Peace Conference or the enforcement provisions ascribed to the newly established "League of Nations," the fear of instability and the risk of domestic conflicts persuaded the ruling and self-proclaimed winning elites of East Central Europe to make the best choice for the futures of their respective countries by implementing centralist administrations.

As a result, regardless of their political systems, whether republican or monarchical, the advocates of Czechoslovakism, the Serbian parties in Belgrade, the parties in the Romanian Regat, and a significant portion of the Polish leadership in Warsaw drew inspiration from France, Italy, and, basically, Western Europe. Consistently, federal options as well as administrations based on regional devolution or cantonal experiences were rejected. Centralization, however, provoked disappointment in sections of the population and reinforced the aversion of minorities, who were expecting equal treatment and inclusiveness. Furthermore, the decision was made quickly, and implemented as quickly, because, in different cases, state borders were still undefined and the disbanded conscripts were often coming back home with their own weapons. In revolutionary times, centralization ultimately appeared to be a convincing lever for stabilization. However, in embracing centralism, those ethnic groups that were still hoping to avoid minority status became unexpectedly citizens of new states, without guarantees for local, autonomous management. The sense of discrimination quickly took root, affecting the reliability of the new constitutional arrangements.

In other words, the controversy over the system of governance, which dates back to the immediate postwar period, is to be seen through different lenses. First, as noted, the debate inflamed the new nation-state perspective of East Central Europe as soon as the brutality of the military conflict was over. Second, the international and local uncertainties contributed to reinforce the centralist option. Third, this orientation had a negative impact on minorities

and their rights perceptions, encouraged domestic dissatisfaction, raised tensions with neighbors and worsened the opportunities of reconciliation, particularly when minorities belonged to a "vanquished nation" (or were perceived as such). This was, for example, the case with the Hungarians in Romania and Czechoslovakia; the Lithuanians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians incorporated into Poland; the Macedonians (considered Bulgarians in Sofia) and the Albanians in the Kingdom of SHS;[13] and the Germans in Czechoslovakia. Even the reference to the names of the "three South Slav tribes" did not hinder the perception of some circles in Belgrade that the Serbs were the "real winners," while the peoples incorporated into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and specifically the Croats, had to be regarded among the losers.

Additionally, the will to maintain control over mass movements and the choice in support of the centralization option were not the unique consequence of postwar uncertainties and the cause of democracy-building weaknesses. The profound disagreements about the border proposals of the Paris Peace Conference played a crucial role either in encouraging alternative strategies about the substance of the state-building definition, or in paving the way to irredentist claims, once again under the influence of the Italian policy of the "mutilated victory."[14]

Since the nineteenth century, in fact, opposite geopolitical arrangements were cherished by revolutionary spirits committed to fight for the freedom of nations. For example, relevant personalities imagined the restoration of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, the establishment of a Danubian federation, and/or a common state of the South Slavs (Bulgarians included). However, these programs were opposed by other intellectuals who supported alternative ethno-national projects, sometimes affected by antisemitism, and whose focus was particularly related to the implementation of a "healthy national egoism" by pursuing the independence of Poles, Lithuanians, Croats, and Romanians together with the assimilation of minorities or their emigration.[15] This cultural and historical background of conflicting visions of the "national future" came powerfully to light during World War One and determined the immediate postwar agendas.

So, as M. B. B. Biskupski noted in Chapter 2 in this volume, while Roman Dmowski advocated an ethno-Polish centralized (and antisemitic) state, Józef Piłsudski by contrast elaborated a wider plan, called "Intermarium" or "Promethean," aimed at restoring the territory of the eighteenth-century Commonwealth as a broader (and possibly decentralized) state, together with Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine.[16] The project was, however, rejected by the national movements of the other potentially interested countries. Consistently, this discrepancy lay at the origin of the brutal Polish wars against Lithuania, Western Ukraine, and, in the end, also against Soviet Russia. Finally, the project failed, despite the Polish victory against the Red Army in the battle for Warsaw and the incorporation of extensive eastern territories and ethnic minorities into Poland with the Treaty of Riga in 1921. As a result, a centralized Poland was established,

meeting in this sense the expectations of Dmowski. However, interwar Poland was ethnically diversified, with a number of minorities, reminding one in some way of the heterogeneity of the Polish state before the partitions that had inspired Piłsudski's nationalism.

Meanwhile, and differently from Poland, the South Slav monarchy avoided a war among its ethnic components, but not the tensions that emerged as soon as the kingdom was proclaimed. The federalist perspective supported by Ante Trumbić (the first minister of foreign affairs of the kingdom, who signed the Corfu Declaration) together with the republicanism and the autonomy advocated by the Croatian Peasant Party, led by Stjepan Radić, confronted the centralist preferences of the Serbian political parties in Belgrade during the debates at the Constituent Assembly. This polarization marked the domestic relations for the whole interwar period, as described by Stipica Grgić in his contribution to this volume. In particular, the deadlock situation provoked by the assassination of Stjepan Radić in 1928 and the lack of consensus about the future of the country confirmed by the king during his meetings with the leaders of the parties paved the way to his authoritarian coup.

Furthermore, the South Slav kingdom had to cope with the dissatisfaction of the territorial arrangements that concerned Macedonia (called at the time "Southern Serbia") with Bulgaria and the Albanians of Kosovo. Actually, the Macedonian issue was at least temporarily regulated by Aleksandar Stamboliyski through the 1923 Treaty of Niš. As for the Albanians of Kosovo, they had limited opportunities for action (either in the case of reducing discrimination or, more radically, to strengthening relations with Tirana). This was mainly due to the chaotic situation that predominated in Albania, whose traditional lack of any kind of unity and persistence of tribal autocracy made centralization an arduous process to be achieved, but also a prerequisite for institutional consolidation. The process, however, was additionally complicated by the ambiguous relations that Zogu established with the Belgrade government and, later, Italy, as described by Bernd Fischer in Chapter 8 in this volume.

A similar, uneasy confrontation between centralization and autonomy was tried in Transylvania by Romanians and Hungarians, as soon as King Ferdinand validated the Alba Iulia Declaration. This declaration was a unilateral document in support of the unification with the Regat, which was signed only by Romanian leaders from the regions of the defunct Austro-Hungarian Empire, regions that had previously belonged to the Hungarian St. Stephen's Crown. Despite the principles included in the third article in support of minority rights and national freedoms, the Hungarians of Transylvania were culturally and politically unprepared to accept the status of minorities, considering the privileges they had enjoyed in the Habsburg Empire. And, in fact, the confrontation between the two ethnic groups worsened quickly, affecting their coexistence. In more recent times, scholars from both sides have admitted that the third article was implemented only to a limited degree, if at all, with far-reaching consequences for the future coexistence within "Great Romania."[17]

Crucially, the vast territorial "amputations" of Hungary and Bulgaria were perceived in both Budapest and Sofia as unfair and unmerited, imposed by the winners at the Paris Peace Conference. In reaction, these territorial changes generated wide feelings of humiliation and anger. As a result, as soon as the respectively Soviet and peasant revolutionary movements were annihilated, irredentist claims sharply intensified and the appeal for treaty revision dominated their foreign policy agendas. The subsequent conservative/authoritarian regimes, which seized and held power de facto almost until the end of World War Two in both countries – even though Bulgaria had a second opportunity, after 1919, to rely on a peaceful change of government in 1931 – nurtured such a deep resentment toward their neighbors and the outcomes of the Paris Conference that their international behavior was severely affected. A poisoned political atmosphere marked, therefore, the relations in the whole Danubian–Balkan basin and unquestionably contributed to facilitate the growing influence of fascist culture in the 1920s and the penetration of Nazi Germany in the 1930s.[18]

To sum up, the interwar situation of East Central Europe at the beginning of the 1920s was characterized by great disorder. Many factors provided a weak basis for state-building and consolidation. Briefly, they can be recalled as follows: war and peace traumas; conflicting (and illusory) territorial projects on the part of local leaderships; protracted military operations; irredentist demands and perceptions of insecurity; opposing aspirations with respect to systems of governance; dissatisfaction with one's minority status; and revolutionary hopes or fears – partly connected to the Bolshevik challenge, and partly deriving from the unknown impact of male suffrage (in countries were illiteracy was still predominant) or from the introduction of the general suffrage in some other situations (such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, the Baltic republics, and Soviet Russia). As a result, the potential for democracy-building was doomed to be constrained from the beginning given the persistence of a minimalist approach.

Furthermore, as noted above, even the minimalist approach did not last for long. Authoritarian regimes were soon imposed. Actually, one or more coups occurred between 1920 and 1934 (for example, twice in Romania and Bulgaria, as reported in Chapter 5 by Roland Clark and Chapter 6 by Christian Promitzer). In most cases, political parties were banned and parliaments disbanded. Subsequently, however, some conservative and right-wing organizations were allowed to operate (in Bulgaria even a pro-communist party), elections occurred (although unfair and not free or only partially free), while the parliament was basically serving the directives of the ruler. To a certain extent, the mechanism of governance and the organization of power after the coups reflected the Italian Fascist experience, whose social pattern and internal affairs were in some measure appreciated as a convincing mechanism of stabilization and securitization. Applied in a variety of situations, this happened even when Mussolini's foreign policy was criticized or firmly opposed by some of the East Central European countries.[19]

Czechoslovakia, by contrast, represented an exception, to a large extent. Nonetheless, even in this case, the centralized system of governance prevailed. Moreover, Czechoslovakism, as a predominant political culture that promoted the Czechoslovak language and determined the institutional organization of the country, actually reinforced and legitimated the Czech role in the management of power, ignoring Slovak demands for autonomy. Furthermore, this had a negative effect in the minority policies pursued, particularly vis-à-vis the Germans and the Hungarians, but also as regards the Ukrainians/Ruthenes, who did not perceive the new country as an inclusive environment. Rather, they felt marginalized. Interestingly, the grievances of ethnic groups occurred within a democratic republican framework, based on a multiparty system with regular free elections and the legal participation of the communists. Paradoxically, however, the enduring concentration of the decision-making process within a coalition of five parties became, in the end, an important source of weakness of the political system, rather than a stabilizing factor. In fact, it contributed to raising a sense of institutional inflexibility, which generated, in turn, a sharp confrontation with minorities, polarizing mutual perceptions of threats and demands of security. Ultimately, Hitler's exploitation of such a situation – with the support of Mussolini and the liberal Western powers – led to the failure of both democracy-building and state-building in Czechoslovakia.

However, the Czechoslovak partition of 1938–1939 had far-reaching consequences, far beyond the local issues of borders and minority inclusion strategies. The way the country was forced to dissolve strengthened the belief, in all of East Central Europe, that minorities were, in essence, "Trojan horses" that neighboring kindred states could easily manipulate to achieve their irredentist claims. This conviction was furthermore reinforced by the fact that the minority treaties, determined at the Paris Peace Conference, were signed by (or "imposed on," as they were actually perceived) East Central European successor states only, while the Western European powers were not subject to their clauses. As a result, the newly established states assumed that their sovereignty was limited from the beginning and that minorities represented the main limiting factor. Under these circumstances, local antisemitism strengthened or germinated in a remarkable fashion. Subsequently, the Nazi manipulation of minorities, pursued through imposed "arbitrations" or even extermination policies, reinforced the conviction that minorities manifested a "natural lack of loyalty." The extremist flourishing of this feeling also explains why collaboration in the implementation of the Shoah could rely on enthusiastic ethno-national supporters during World War Two. In the end, after World War Two, leaders came to the conclusion in many European contexts, that "at least" ethnic cleansing and people's deportations or expulsions were "in a way politically justified," in order to guarantee security through "national homogeneity." The provisions of the Treaty of Lausanne were a patent precedent. And similar territorial reapportionments were, in fact, recorded in 1944–1946 and again in the 1990s.

Still, coming back again to the interwar period, other factors contributed to the failure of democracy-building in the area of our scrutiny. As is frequently reported by the authors of this book, the impact of the 1929 crisis played a key role, not only economically, but also politically. On the one hand, the placement of agricultural products on Western markets became increasingly problematic for the still predominantly rural countries of East Central Europe. Furthermore, export contraction was followed by a radical decline of Western loans and investments. In addition, peasant indebtedness had contracted in previous years, but, when the postwar economy seemed to recover, it became unsustainable and the impoverishment of the countryside worsened quickly. All that occurred when dictatorships were already in place in almost all the states of East Central Europe. However, as noted above, parliaments were still operating, albeit within the limitations imposed by the authoritarian domestic context.

Under these circumstances, as paradoxical it may sound, on the initiative of members of the Greek parliament, a series of conferences of Balkan countries was launched, drawing inspiration from the ideas of Aristide Briand, who suggested in 1929 that a European federation be established to foster international solidarity and economic development across the countries. In harmony with this spirit, delegations from Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, Greece, and Turkey, despite their disagreements, met in Athens in October 1929, in Istanbul in 1931, in Bucharest in 1932, and in Thessaloniki in 1933.[20] The main goal was to support a customs union and to implement a regional market. Therefore, they pressured their respective governments to harmonize the rules and the agreements bilaterally signed since 1926 between some of the countries, eventually extending their validity further to the whole peninsula. Under this framework, a Balkan Chamber of Commerce was founded on 27 May 1932 and a regional network of bilateral trade agreements was concluded by 1934.[21]

Basically, the effort was to develop a shared blueprint for building an association with membership from parliaments (although not exclusively),[22] whose main interest would have been to find a way out from the impact of the 1929 crisis in the Balkans. Nonetheless, the ambitions were broader compared with what they had been at the beginning, when the potential of a Balkan Union was discussed in Greece in 1929 during the 27th Universal Congress of Peace. However, the idea included a cogent political perspective where minority rights would have played a key role. Not surprisingly, Bulgaria, in particular, raised this issue as early as at the first meeting, while Yugoslavia was reluctant to discuss protective measures. Ultimately, the Bulgarian delegation decided to leave the third conference because the minority question was not properly addressed. Subsequent meetings occurred in Sofia and other capitals to achieve a convergence that, in the end, allowed the summoning of a fourth conference in Thessalonica. Once again, however, all these efforts could not last for long. The minority issue remained a crucial "apple of discord" even in

a formally unofficial framework, as the Balkan conferences were, reaffirming in this sense how problematic the path to reconciliation and recognition of equality was.

Consequently, the mutual lack of confidence among the countries of East Central Europe was an additional factor that contributed to the deterioration of the regional environment, weakening state-building and annihilating the minimalist democracy-building, if and where it was still alive. Furthermore, this situation paved the way for the competitive interference of the great powers.

To sum up, minority status, irredentist demands, territorial claims, and external threats aggravated the sense of insecurity. In 1934 Nazi Germany and Poland signed a non-aggression pact that raised the alarm in Prague. At the same time, the Balkan conferences lost their collective meaning as soon as Bulgaria and Albania were excluded from the Balkan Entente, which was perceived both in Sofia and in Tirana as an aggressive act against their hopes to carry out a "peaceful revisionism."

At the end of the same year Hjalmar Schacht, Hitler's newly appointed minister of economics, suggested to SouthEast European countries an exchange of agricultural goods for German agro-industrial equipment. The *Neuer Plan*, as it was called, was submitted as a "generous offer" to help these countries deal with the effects of the 1929 crisis and the limited results achieved by the regional trade agreements. The Balkan governments accepted the proposal, which actually turned out to be a huge fraud. Germany in fact systematically postponed the implementation of the Plan's provisions, spending its resources on the country's rearmament rather than meeting the agro-industrial expectations of Southeastern Europe.[23] Meanwhile, Italy was able to intensify its penetration into Albania, despite the (weak) resistance of King Zog, and therefore to establish the potential for further expansion in the Balkans.

At that point, however, East Central Europe was at the mercy of the right-wing extremism of Nazism and Fascism, both domestically and internationally. Not surprisingly, their political culture and praxis inspired the actions of paramilitary forces, for example in Austria, Hungary, Poland, and Romania, as well as in the Sudetenland, threatening the last appearances of a parliamentary system, even when it was just a mere façade.

In the end, once the *Anschluss* (unification) with Austria was achieved by Hitler in March 1938 and the Munich Agreement was signed in September 1938, the quarrelsome countries of East Central Europe became tightened by a grip that left no chance for them to resist and survive. Under these conditions, as the Hungarian scholar István Bibó effectively summarized in the title of one of his famous books, the misery of the small East European states patently showed how powerless their institutions were to offer any potential for democracy-building and state consolidation.[24] Inevitably, instead, they succumbed to the external, and more powerful, oppressive regimes, suffered new partitions and/or compromised themselves, by supporting Nazi Germany and its policies, including the extermination of Jews, Roma, and political opponents.

In sum, the East Central European leaderships devoted all their efforts over two decades either to consolidate or to affect the postwar geopolitical framework, muddling authoritative and consensual institutions with authoritarian regimes and dictatorships. Truly, their main aim was to preserve social conformity and the power of the prewar ruling classes. Consequently, they pursued domestic and international divisive policies, fearing the far-reaching effects of mass societies, which were, however, marking the development of modernity. As a result, the failure of democracy-building in this region was, to a large extent, the unavoidable outcome of the political blindness of leaders, who implemented – in one form or another – exclusive rather than inclusive policies, looking at the past, rather than investing in the future. In the end, their uncertainties and reservations about how to cope with the comprehensive implications of modernity generated a lack of political and institutional courage, paving the way not only for the annihilation of democratic developments in the region, but also for their World War Two postwar social and political neutralization.

Notes

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2 It should be remembered that military campaigns in the nineteenth century were predominantly short-lived events. Therefore, the great majority of conscripts (mostly peasants) did not have any memory of seemingly endless wars.
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13 Kraljevina Srba, Hrvata, i Slovenaca, or Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes.
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17 Larry L. Watts and Vladimir Ionaş, *Romanian Minority Policy and the 1918 Alba Iulia Resolution* (Bucharest: Roundtable on Ethnic Relations, 2019), pp. 50–52.
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