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**“Democracy to come”
The concepts of democracy of state socialism
in the post-war period**

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ABSTRACT

After WWII, countries of Central Eastern Europe (CEE) experienced numerous changes of their political regimes. The ideologies of these political regimes, aiming the modernization of the societies in the region, were eager to integrate the idea of democracy in its own way. In my paper, I discuss the ideological and semantic changes of the concept of democracy in the era of state socialism and the transition to constitutional liberalism. I analyze the changes of the concept of democracy in its semantic relation to the key concepts of the post-war politics, as socialism, dictatorship of the proletariat, reform, dissidence, liberalization, constitutionalism, capitalism, and liberalism. In the diachronic analysis of these ideological constellations, I will refer the semantic patterns of the concept of democracy: representation of an



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ideal social order, and the coming of “real” democracy in the future. These features still dominate the idea of democracy in the region, eclipsing the meaning of participation in political decision-making.

Keywords: democracy, modernization, communism, socialism, Central Eastern Europe, temporalization

The following paper is an outline on democracy concepts in Hungary from the Second World War to the fall of Communism. For studying the conceptualisations of democracy in Communist regime, I used variant sources of ideological texts of the post-war period: resolutions of the Communist party, article from theoretical periodicals and editorials of the Communist party’s daily paper. In this paper, I will focus on the ideological basics and semantic changes of communist concepts of democracy. Doing this, I will cite primary sources only demonstratively. My purpose is to demonstrate the uses of the concept of democracy in a non-democratic context, and the ideas on ‘real democracy’, which was never accomplished.

On the ideological uses of democracy

Democracy is one of the most contested political concepts in the modern political thought. Hence, in the 20th century there was no political regime which would have denied its own intentions for democracy, the rule of the people. Yet, democracy got into the focus of



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prolific ideological debates during the century. Even the fascists, as well German Nazis, used the term in the adjectival form of ‘authoritarian democracy’, or ‘organic democracy’.¹ The totalitarian and authoritarian forms of Communism, provides a wide range of democracy concepts, as ‘Soviet democracy’, ‘proletarian democracy’, ‘people’s democracy’, ‘socialist democracy’, even the chimera of ‘democratic dictatorship’.

The meaning of democracy, as the ‘rule of the people’, was never disavowed in the Socialist ideological language. In the East and the West the lexical meaning of democracy coincided during the Cold War, yet the opposition between the conceptualization of liberal democracy in the West and the communist variants was apparent. Walther Dieckmann revealed that, there is no contest between the formal definitions of democracy in the East and the West, but between their presuppositions of democracy. These presuppositions give the differences of democracy conceptions, and the difference is carried by the elements of the concept of democracy in contextual uses. Studying the concept of democracy, two elements and their interpretations can cause the contestation between ideological conceptualizations. The different interpretations of *demos* and *kratein* bear the phenomenon what Dieckman calls ideological polysemy, the semantic contestation of ideologies over ‘flag words’ of

¹ Dylan J. Riley: *The Civic Foundations of Fascism in Europe. Italy, Spain, and Rumania 1870- 1945*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2010.



politics.² Similarly, Walter Bryce Gallie has a description of essentially contested concepts as internally complex entity and variously describable in its constituent elements.³ Weighting the different elements, theories of socialism for example prefers equality over freedom, describing the demos, as the group of essentially equal humans. In the ideologies, these semantic contestations are not the same as in a descriptive analysis. Ideologies are not just for theorizing the structures and mechanisms of modern societies, but giving some blueprint for political action and ceasing uncertainty of the social life. Thus, ideologies need concepts to act politically, concepts which can be fixed in its contextual meaning. This process was called ideological de-contestation by Michael Freedon, who supplemented Gallie by the theory of concepts in political use. De-contestation is the temporarily stabilization of the meaning of the concept and its position in ideological morphology of basic political concepts. Freedon described the purpose of de-contestation: “Indeed, the major functions of the decontestation of political concepts are not connected, on our understanding, to underscoring the truths of logical purism or value perfectionism, but to supporting courses of political

² On 'ideologische Polysemie' and 'Fahnenwörter', see Walther Dieckmann: *Sprache in der Politik. Einführung in die Pragmatik und Semantik der politischen Sprache*. 2. Aufl. C. Winter, Heidelberg, 1975.

³ The classic text on essentially contested concepts, Gallie, W.B.: Essentially Contested Concepts. In W.B. Gallie.: *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding*. Chatto & Windus, London, 1964., pp. 157-191. On the critics and uses of Gallie's theory, see David Collier- Fernando Daniel Hidalgo- Andrea Olivia Maciuceanu: Essentially contested concepts: Debates and applications. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 11(3), 2006, pp. 211–246.



action and enabling the development of organizational practices, to the psychological need to restrict uncertainty, and to the communicative need to employ common linguistic conventions, whether agreed or imposed. In the course of that process a thought-of choice becomes a thought-of certainty, but certainty is no indicator of truth, and the form decontesting adopts is itself elastic and indeterminate.”⁴

In the following paper, I make an attempt to follow the contextual de-contestation and re-decontestations of the concept of democracy in the post-war history of Hungary, and similar formulations in Central Eastern Europe. The first ideological de-contestation of democracy in the postwar period is the concept of *popular* -, or *people’s democracy*, which was the term and theory of Stalinist strategy and rapid Communist modernization. The second, the concept of *socialist democracy* marked a

⁴ Michael Freeden: *Ideologies and Political Theory. A Conceptual Approach*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996,. p. 140. Further texts on de-contestation as ideological process by Freeden: Practising ideology and ideological practices? In Michael Freeden: *Liberal Languages. Ideological Imaginations and Twentieth-Century Progressive Thought*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2005. pp. 236-261. ; Editorial: Essential Contestability and Effective Contestability, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 9 (1), 2004. pp.3–11.; What Should the “Political” in Political Theory Explore?, *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 13 (2), 2005. pp. 113–34.; Ideology and Political Theory, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 11 (1), 2006. pp. 3–22. On similar theories of ideological de-contestation, see Aletta Norval: The Things We Do with Words- Contemporary Approaches to the Analysis of Ideology. *British Journal of Political Science*, 30 (2), 2000. pp. 313- 346., and Alan Finlayson: Rhetoric and the Political Theory of Ideologies. *Political Studies*, 60 (4), 2012. pp. 751–767.



variant of Communist idea on democracy in the post-Stalinist era. Though, the ideological foundations and principles of socialist democracy based on the same ideological narrative as the Stalinist democracy concept, *socialist democracy* offers a different form of comprehensive social transformation. The project of socialist democracy was revived in some elements in the third experiment of de-contestation of democracy. Gorbachev's reforms slowly headed for the open-ended concept of democracy, though the intention of his politics was a moderate pluralism of Socialist society. The peculiarity of the third experiment lays in the failure of temporarily de-contestation and the unintended pluralisation of the concept of democracy in itself.

Democracy and the Theories of Marxism-Leninism

For a description of the conceptualization of democracy in in the post-war CEE, first the position of democracy in Communist theory must be outlined. In the works of Marx and Engels democracy were formulated in variant ways, depending on the contextual changes of the texts of the founders of Communism. In the early writings, Marx promoted democracy as the revolutionary last-stage of Hegelian historical development. What is specific in the early Marx that is, his conception differs from contemporary liberal, radical and social formulations of democracy.⁵ Marx and Engels rejected almost the whole political vocabulary of 19th century bourgeois politics. For them, the concept of

⁵Werner Conze- Christian Meier- Reinhart Koselleck- Hans Maier- Hans Leo Reimann: Demokratie. In: *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland: A-D*. Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart, 1972. p.



democracy of the contemporaries was the part of the ideology of capitalist classes, serving the repression and exploitation of the workers. They targeted mainly the idea of representative democracy, which only represented a narrow section of the society that time.⁶ In the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx wanted to abolish the abstract separation of the economic basics of human life and the existence in the political order, the well-known difference of the *bourgeois* and the *citoyen*. According to the young Marx, real democracy can be founded on the integrated materialist vision of human life, where equality can be universalized, independently from the social status. In this formulation, democracy can come with the revolution of the proletariat.⁷ The revolution, as the last political deed before the state of Communism, can establish the only democratic form in the history of the people. In the Communist Manifesto, written in the revolutionary year of 1848, Marx and Engels wrote, “the first step in the revolution by the working class, is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling as to win the battle of democracy”⁸. Thus, by the mid-19th century the two core elements of Communist democracy conception had been appeared: the difference of real democracy and the democracy of capitalist bourgeoisie, and the democracy as a revolutionary stage to the state of Communism.

⁶ For a detailed assessment of Marx's conceptions of democracy, see Josph V. Femia: *Marxism and Democracy*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993.

⁷ On Marx's critique of Hegel's, see Shlomo Avineri: *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1968. pp. 8-41.

⁸Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels: The Communist Manifesto. In: *Karl Marx. Selected writings*. Edited by David McLellan. OUP, Oxford, 2000. pp. 245-273. p.261.



After the failed revolutions of 1848 and the reactionary takeovers in Europe, the writings of Marx and Engels changed their focus from the philosophical description of real democracy to strategic analysis of democracy in revolutions. They condemned the tactical compromise of social revolutionaries with the bourgeoisie. For Marx and Engels, the compromise with other classes retracts the revolution of the proletariat, so the revolutionary coalitions easily can be the betrayal of the case of the working class. And, every betrayal strengthens the force of the reactionaries, as it was the case in France, described in Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Therefore, the Marxian idea of democracy was an anti-parliamentarian concept, as well. It is enough to think about the debates with social democrats in the *Critique of the Gotha Program* and the factions of the Second international. The latter started the process of breaking in the socialist movement, between a revolutionary Marxist and a social democrat branch, where the former linked democracy to proletarian dictatorship as a new quality of political systems in history.

As the revolutionary of the 20th century, Lenin has the same dilemmas in the turbulent years of revolutions of Russia in 1905 and 1917. For Lenin, the major question was the revolutionizing the quasi-feudal Russia. Before 1917, Bolsheviks had different scenarios on the bourgeois revolution as the first step toward other revolutions, like the alliance of workers with the massive Russian peasantry. In *State and Revolution*, worrying about the faltering revolutionary process, Lenin's critique targeted the leftists who were devoted to the benefits of former bourgeois revolution, the provisional government and continuation of



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war. Calling them ‘social-chauvinists’, Lenin pursued the strengthening class struggles for the insurgence of the proletariat. In his theory, proletarian revolution can establish a new type of democracy, where the proletariat is in power. In this stage democracy and the dictatorship of the proletariat exists together. Democracy is the political form of the working class, and dictatorship is against the capitalist enemies of the new workers’ state, as the doctrine went. For Lenin, this step is for the withering of the state, while democracy also would have dissolved in Communism.

What followed the Bolshevik takeover is more a dictatorial than democratic development. Bolsheviks neither had experience in democratic discussions with political parties, nor in the pluralism of social interests.⁹ The armed struggles and the problems of organizing the proletarian state were prioritized and resolved by a more and more powerful dictatorial center and controlled bureaucracy. The Bolshevik power center uprooted the only form of democratic workers’ associations, the Soviets. As early as in 1918 Lenin declared, “Democracy is a form of bourgeois state championed by all traitors to genuine socialism, who now find themselves at the head of official

⁹ The political mechanisms inside the Bolshevik party, as well as in every Marxist-Leninist party, followed the system of ‘democratic centralism’. Democratic centralism is the practices of submission from lower to higher platforms of party; the mechanisms of decision-making; the absoluteness of the objective truth of the party. Democratic centralism was aimed at the operation of the bureaucracy of the party, and not the political debate. On the bureaucratisation of the Bolshevik party and politics, see Neil Harding: *The Marxist-Leninist Detour*. In John Dunn (ed.) *Democracy: The Unfinished Journey*. OUP, Oxford, 1992. pp. 155-187.



socialism and who assert that democracy is contrary to the dictatorship of the proletariat. Until the revolution transcended the limits of bourgeois system, we were for democracy; but as soon as we saw the first signs of socialism in the progress of the revolution we took a firm and resolute stand for the dictatorship of the proletariat”¹⁰ After the repression of the Soviets, there were no more illusion on an authentic form of workers’ democracy. As Soma Marik wrote on the failure of Bolsheviks and the error of Leninist doctrines, it was a collapse of politics into administration, where “public differences and structures to regulate them would have been required” and “politics, as the articulation of divergent lines of proposed public conduct, would have been existed”.¹¹

Ideological struggles for ‘true democracy’

(Ideological functions of the use of the concept of democracy)

During the Communist period of the states of Central Eastern Europe three functions of the ideological de-contestation of the concept of democracy can be identified. These functions are rhetoric, developer, educational, respectively.

¹⁰ Speech in The Third Congress of Soviets on 25 January 1918. Cited by Leszek Kolakowski: *Main Currents of Marxism: The Founders, The Golden Age, The Breakdown*. W.W. Norton, New York, 2005 p. 761.

¹¹ Soma Marik: *Reinterrogating the Classical Marxist of Revolutionary Democracy*. Aakar Books, Delhi, 2008. p. 379.



First, the conceptualizations of democracy are always imbedded into the anti-imperialist rhetoric of democracy. Emphasizing the novelty and uniqueness of Marxist-Leninist form of democracy always stood as the starting point of Communist theories of democracy. George Lukacs wrote, “The worst form of socialism better than the best form of capitalism”, and this precept was obligatory for Communists in CEE, as well. Following Marx’s position, with the revolution of the proletariat, liberal democracy and its institutions was already transcend, socialist states are in a stage of historical evolution which is irreversible.

Second, Communist concepts of democracy also designated a principle and system for organizing state structures, economic sphere, and societal life. In the heart of the principle there is a great controversy, namely that the planned economy is always more efficient than market economy, while the economic system of Communist state are more democratic than the Western models. To maintain this controversial principle, the structure of economy, and the state alike, underwent ideological revisions for time to time, what called reforms. To response for Lukacs’s above-mentioned tenet, Ernst Bloch wrote, “the worst form of socialism is not socialism at all”.¹² For those who believed the reforms of communist system, the possibility of democracy conveyed the authenticity of a real socialism, a ticket to the Communist paradise.

¹² On the statements of Lukacs and Bloch, see Stephen Eric Bronner: Lukács and the Dialectic: contributions to a Theory of Practice. In: *Georg Lukacs Reconsidered: Critical Essays in Politics, Philosophy and Aesthetics*. Edited by Michael J. Thompson. Continuum IPG, London, 2011. pp. 13-33., p. 23.



Third, the concept of democracy was about the future of society and the new man of socialism. As we shall see, new man of socialism has standard attributions and virtues in communal life. Bo Strååth described this ideal type of socialist human in the following way: “Visions of work were the foundation of the chiliastic ideas of ‘the New Man’ in Soviet Russia. With socialism as a basis the emergence of a new type of man was anticipated: solidaristic instead of egoistic, collective-minded instead of individually oriented. The icon of this New Man was a male and muscular manufacturing worker with a powerful faith in future progress.”¹³ Thus, socialism and democracy is not only the transformation of political structures and economic conditions, but the project of educating people and ameliorating human nature.

(The origin of the Stalinist concept and the crisis of post-war CEE)

The concept of democracy was re-formulated in Communist theory in the inter-war period Comintern politics, first of all for strategic purposes. The inspiration came from different sources of revolutionary theory, as the revolutionary experiences of the Paris commune, Plekhanov’s idea on the hegemony of the proletariat in a bourgeois society, or Lenin’s early formulations on the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry. Plekhanov and also Lenin revoked this thesis, but the idea of a revolutionary coalition of the classes and compromise of progressive forces was dusted in the inter-war period,

¹³ Bo Strååth: Ideology and history. *Journal of Political Ideologies* (February 2006), 11(1), pp. 23–42., p. 31.



when fascism risked the imminent catastrophe for those who didn't want to live in a totalitarian state.¹⁴ Stalin, the Spanish civil war was the first time to enforce the doctrine of people's democracy as the popular front of anti-fascist forces. Stalin and Comintern Bolsheviks declared it as a stage of revolution in Europe and distinguishing it from the Soviet way of revolutionary progress.¹⁵ The strategy was revived in the anti-fascist war in Eastern Europe, organizing the new basis of post-war rebuilding. After the World War II, mobilization of a shattered society to rebuild the country proved to be a hard task. In CEE, borders were re-drawn, sometimes with serious consequences (GDR, Poland etc.), associated with the deportation and relocation of ethnic blocks from one country to the other. The disunity of the nations was increased by the casualties of the war and the economy in ruins. The aversion toward the Soviet army, and the repulsion of the ideas of Bolshevism among the people, hardened the political situation of local communists.¹⁶ The circumstances made Stalin cautious, as well as the Communists returning from the

¹⁴ Alfred J. Rieber: Popular Democracy: An Illusion? In: *Stalinism Revisited: The establishment of communist regimes in East-Central Europe*. Edited by Vladimir Tismăneanu. CEU Press, Budapest, 2009. pp. 103-136. pp. 105-106.

¹⁵ E.H. Carr: *The Comintern & the Spanish Civil War*. Edited by Tamara Deutscher . London: Macmillan, 1984.

¹⁶ On the political, economic, and social conditions in Eastern Europe after the WWII, see *The Establishment of Communist Regimes in Eastern Europe, 1944-1949*. Edited by Norman Naimark and Leonid Gibianskii. Westview Press, Boulder, 1997; *Stalinism Revisited: The establishment of communist regimes in East-Central Europe*. Edited by Vladimir Tismăneanu. CEU Press, Budapest, 2009; Anne Applebaum: *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe, 1944-1956*. Allan Lane, London, 2012.



Soviet Union. In this transitional period, democracy was prioritized in Communist vocabulary, at the expense of traditional Marxist concepts as revolution, proletariat, and Communism.

(From the democracy of the people to the dictatorship of the proletariat)

A new type of democracy was formulated for the purpose of Communist transformation in the concept of people's democracy, emphasizing "people", as the new carriers of the state power. For the first step of the Stalinization of CEE's societies, Communist intended the seizure of state power and encouraged the permanent struggle with the enemies of this transition. Hinting 'people', Communist theorist created the enemies of this new power (bourgeoisie, the Church, kulaks, state officials from the old system and so on) and concentrated into the concept of 'reaction' or 'reactionary forces'. The latter represented everything the past, the repression of working people in the last centuries. In Hungary József Révai argued along people's democracy as the power of the working class first time in Hungarian history: "What is the difference between the new people's democracy and the ordinary bourgeois democracy? The difference lays, first of all, in the definitive influence of working people on the state power, bureaucracy, police, army, the armed force of the state; and this working class is led by our Party, the Communist Party."¹⁷ The ideologists of people's democracy in

¹⁷ Révai József: Miért harcol a kommunista párt a független, szabad demokratikus Magyarorszáért? [Why do the communist party strive for an independent, free, and



CEE conceptualized democracy in the way of emphasizing the dynamics of new democracy in the uses of ‘democratic reconstruction of the country’, ‘the democratic agrarian reform’, ‘democratic struggle against reactionary forces’, ‘democracy in offense’ and so on.

People’s democracy was also used as a concept of transitional economic system. The Soviet economist, A.N. Leontiev described people’s democracy as a specific socio-economic system between capitalism and socialism: “As the result of the implemented reforms in new democracies, a specific socio-economic system was formed. This system is a transition from capitalism to socialism.”¹⁸ Though, it was just a formal similarity of social and economic structure of CEE countries, and the ideologists must accept the differences of national economies and societies. Leontiev even admitted that the exploitative forces of capitalism is not ceased in these countries, the speculative elements and capitalist manipulations still existed. The difference was the state power as an instrument to regulate and repel the remnants of bourgeois thinking. For this, according to the communist ideology, the state granted the rights of worker and their interests were also taken into the account. The protected and newly educated working class is not exploitable any more, as it was in the times of bourgeois capitalism. According to the one of the most outstanding economic theorist of

democratic Hungary?] In.Révai József: *Élni tudunk a szabadsággal* [We could live with freedom]. Szikra, Budapest, 1949. p. 439.

¹⁸ A. Leontjev [Leontiev]: Az új demokrácia gazdasági alapjai. [The economic foundations of the new democracy] *Társadalmi Szemle*, 3 (1), 1948. p. 32.



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people's democracy, Eugene Varga, "The change in the character of the state- its transformation from a weapon of domination in the hands of the propertied classes in to the state the working people- this is what determines the real significance of the transfer of a decisive part of the means of production into the hands of the state in the countries of a democracy of a new type."¹⁹ The development of CEE countries as people democracy was also guaranteed in the international sphere, by the economic and political integration into the Soviet bloc.

Beyond the political and economic transformation, the political man of the new type of political subject was aimed by people's democracy. For this the cultural transformation was required on the Marxist basis. It means the elimination of the practice of bourgeois culture, which separated the economic foundations of human life and culture, maintaining the latter for the pessimist and kitschy worldview of bourgeois, as George Lukacs argued in 1946. With the political and economic transformations, the possibilities and timing of the working class also changed. The interdependency of economic basis and the cultural development of the people entailed the education of the uneducated, the institutional and communal source of worker's culture, spare time of the unexploited worker. According to Lukacs, new cultural politics had to offer socialist realism for this process, demonstrating the

¹⁹ The „People's Democracies”: Varga, *Democracy of a New Type* (1947) In: *Documentary History of Communism. Volume 2: Communism and the World*. Edited by Robert V. Daniels. I.B. Tauris&Co., London, 1985. p.143. On the debate of Varga's thesis in the Soviet Union, see Samuel L. Sharp: *New Democracies: A Soviet Interpretation. American Perspective*, 1 (6), 1947, pp. 386-381.



objective truth of their life and granting a selection of the cultural tradition of the past.²⁰ The main goal of people's democracies cultural politics is the education of a new man with sentiments for the community, objective truth of the development of history, and preparing for the coming of Communism.

(Post-Stalinist crisis and the idea of reform)

By 1949, the concept of people's democracy irrevocably intertwined with the concept of dictatorship. In that year, Mátyás Rákosi, general secretary of ruling Hungarian Working People's Party proclaimed, in agreement with Bulgarian and Polish communist leaders Georgi Dimitrov and Bolesław Bierut, that “[R]egarding its functions, people's democracy is the dictatorship of the proletariat without Soviet form.”²¹ The concept of people's democracy ended up in Stalinist constitutions all over in Central Eastern Europe, used as the description of the political form of the state, while a new variant of democracy emerged in the post-Stalinist period. For the Communist theorists of this historical period the main source of reference remained the classics of Marxism-Leninism. For example, the Hungarian doctrinal texts after the revolution of 1956 often referred to Lenin's State and Revolution, when

²⁰ Lukács György: Demokrácia és kultúra. [Democracy and culture] *Társadalmi Szemle*, 1 (1), 1946. pp. 31-40.; Lukács György: Demokrácia és irodalom. [Democracy and literature] *Társadalmi Szemle*, 1 (3), 1946. pp. 193-204.

²¹ Rákosi Mátyás: A népi demokrácia néhány problémájáról. [On the problems of people's democracy]. *Társadalmi Szemle*, 4 (1), 1949. p. 2. A report on the Congress of Bulgarian Workers' Party.



they emphasized the gradual historical development to the Communist society. In fact, socialist democracy meant a more static and complex stage of historical evolution, compared to popular democracy.

After the death of Stalin and the uprisings of East Berlin, Poland and Hungary, Soviet leaders and their Eastern European vicars turned ahead of the reform of Socialism.²² In this context, socialist democracy was not only the re-thinking of Stalinist foundation. It was a challenge of structural reform of economy and social welfare in a socialist way. As Khrushchev condemned the sins of Stalinism in the 20th Congress of the CPSU (1956), and later initiated peaceful co-existence with the West, his politics promised new chances to a more democratic socialism. From the early sixties, the regime made several attempts to renew social interest toward the state and economy. For this, the political leadership wanted to restore and stimulate “social, popular, and voluntary organizations, such as trade unions and worker committees in the workplace, comrade’s courts and street patrols, housing committees, women’s councils, veteran associations and youth groups.”²³ Meanwhile, the reforms served the economic and welfare contest with the Western economies, as well. In the underdeveloped economies, as the states of Central Eastern Europe,

²² On the crisis of post-Stalinism, see Grzegorz Ekiert: *The State against Society: Political Crises and their Aftermath in East Central Europe*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1996.

²³ Melanie Ilic: Introduction. In: *Soviet State and Society under Khrushchev*. Edited by Melanie Ilic and Jeremy Smith. Routledge, Oxford, 2009. p. 3. For the reforms of Nikita Khrushchev, see Alexander Titov: The 1961 Party Programme and the fate of Khrushchev’s reforms in the same volume, pp. 8-26.



the Communist way of reformism was adjusted by the relaxation of strictly planned economy and the possibility of some private property. In the sixties, this kind of reformism characterized the rule of Walter Ulbricht in the GDR, Władysław Gomułka in Poland, János Kádár in Hungary, and Alexander Dubček in Czechoslovakia.

(Semantic changes and the meaning of ‘socialist democracy’)

In most of the CEE countries the changes what the concept of socialist democracy carried were less political, than economic and social. Socialist democracy as a political system conveyed the representativeness of the socialist state. This representation, although, did not mean fair and free election, but the quasi-corporative representation of the state structure. State structure was formed by the communist parties, and the institutions and movements were under party control. Beyond the pseudo-representativeness of the socialist parliament, the satellite organizations and institutions undertook the organizational and political educational task of society. Youth and women organizations, trade unions and professional associations, even political alliances of non-party members provided the forums of limited debates on the progress of Socialist society. In the ideological texts in Hungary, the new era came with ‘the grounding of the foundations of socialism’, which meant the new phase of democracy as well. “This democracy is the fulfillment of human rights, which is unprecedented in the development of human



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societies.”²⁴ Or in another text, “The wide-range development of the mechanisms of democracy is the key of improving or socialist state and the formation of universal popular state.”²⁵

In the context of reform socialist democracy got a specific meaning, democracy appeared in the workplace. In the Communist theory, the most fundamental embeddedness of the citizens into the society is influenced by the material basics and the conditions of labour. Socialist democracy, as the propaganda said, is the democracy of the workers on negotiating and debating on labour conditions in the workplace. What is more, the conceptions also covered planning and managing the given unit of production. The scope of these workers forum can found in workers councils, in agricultural cooperative meetings, in labour union’s committee. Thus, democratic rights were dispersed in the micro-level of the society, producing the concepts of ‘factory democracy’, ‘co-operative’s democracy’, ‘trade-union democracy’. These micro-democratic forums were the fields of “the collective spirit in formed in common work”²⁶ and “[T]he co-operatives’

²⁴ Nemes Dezső: A szocialista demokrácia fejlődése Magyarországon. [The development of socialist democracy in Hungary] *Társadalmi Szemle*, 19 (11) 1964 p.20.

²⁵ Markója Imre: A szocialista demokratizmus fejlődésének kérdései. [On the questions of the development of socialist democracy] *Társadalmi Szemle*, 11 (11), 1962. p. 30.

²⁶ Bak István: A szövetkezeti demokrácia és az egyéni paraszt „szabadsága”. [Co-operative’s democracy and the „freedom” of private peasantry] *Pártélet*, 3 (9), 1958. p. 26.



democracy is the summary of rights and duties, and these rights must prevail in the life of the community”²⁷.

Socialist democracy was an ideological challenge to serve the democratic need of the political subject of the Socialist society, the worker. On the other side, the representation of workers and peasants in production, in factories and in agricultural cooperatives, would have been a remedy for the errors of the planned economy. The reform of socialism based in a more open, incentive and managerial economy. The ideology of post-Stalinist authoritarian socialisms made an attempt to take a step toward a Yugoslav-kind of self-managing socialism. Though, neither the models of socialist democracies self-management, nor the Yugoslav model was as democratic as the propaganda and the ideological texts stated. The idea of workers management transformed to the managerial leadership of big socialist enterprises. Even the rights of the workers, which were declared in the socialist constitutions, could not prevail. The limits of such a reform were the frames of the political rule of the party, as the crushing down of the Prague Spring proved it.

Socialist democracy also had an educative purpose, in the socialist ideology the forums and debates of political and economic problems were for developing the state- consciousness of socialist citizens. State-consciousness is a step forward from class-consciousness of the proletariat to the classless Communism. It stands for the union of not

²⁷ Tóth Benedek: Demokrácia és fegyelem a termelőszövetkezetekben. [Democracy and discipline in the co-operatives] *Pártélet*, 11 (5), 1966. p. 19.



just the political, but the whole social sphere under one leading ideology and political direction. This would be a process by the citizens of the socialist state recognize the ineluctability of the objective truth of development. They will think and see with a collective mind, comprehend the necessities of political and economic transformation. For an example, let me cite an example for the educative purpose: The socialist consciousness, erudition, sense of responsibility of our people, their competence in politics and economy are indispensable factors of our socialist democracy. Without this socialist consciousness, they cannot make the best of the great opportunity of socialist democracy; mindless and shallow interferences into the life of the community are not democracy, but hazardous bungling”.²⁸ Thus, the proper practice to aim this purpose is discussions and debates with the worker citizens, accustoming them to a more collective form of life and responsibility for the community. Though, this political and educative inclusion was half-hearted in the reality. In the years of stagnation after the declaration of Brezhnev doctrine, which set the limits of political reforms and liberalization in CEE, socialist democracy lost its ideological force, but was not forget in official declarations.²⁹

(Crisis again: democratization as the last chance)

²⁸ Kálmán Endre: A demokrácia változatai és lehetőségei. [The varieties and chances of democracy] *Társadalmi Szemle*, 23 (8-9) 1968. p. 11.

²⁹ Mark Sandle: *Brezhnev and Developed Socialism: The Ideology of Zastoi?* In: *Brezhnev Reconsidered*. Edited by Edwin Bacon- Mark Sandle. Palgrave- McMillan, New York, 2002. pp. 165-188.



By the eighties, another economic and social crisis had reached the Soviet bloc. In the late eighties the political response to the long crisis rendered the unexpected consequences of the use of the concept of democracy: the pluralization of the meaning of the concept of democracy. The significance of the crisis of the late eighties came from that the leadership of the CPSU and the USSR admitted it. The last experiment to define democracy in state socialism evolved as the part of Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms. Before the turbulent years of 1988 and 1989, the adaptation of Gorbachev's reforms meet reluctance by ageing Communist leaders and their similarly ageing systems. This reluctance manifested in rejection (Romania), rhetorical imitation (Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, GDR) and careful adaptation of some elements (Poland, Hungary).³⁰ Gorbachev's intent was a reform within the system, and this reform would have been exported to Eastern Europe.

Unsealing the doctrines of Khrushchev's utopianism, the chairman of the CPSU abandoned the idea of new man of socialism and emphasized the importance of the new structures, new society, or even a qualitatively new socialism. Gorbachev redefined socialism, as more than the politics of the party and the interests of the USSR and the soviet Bloc. This latter was the core of Brezhnev's politics for almost two decades. The concept of democratization appeared in 1987, after Gorbachev proclaimed glasnosty for a more transparent governance and economy, as a stimulating idea for reconstruction. The idea of democracy in the new system entails new thinking on common problems

³⁰ Charles Gati: Gorbachev and Eastern Europe. *Foreign Affairs*, 65 (5) 1987.



and personal incentives to solve the dilemmas of Communism.³¹ Democracy, first of all, has a meaning in Gorbachev's speeches as de-bureaucratization of the economic processes and even political leadership. Criticism and self-criticism, political discussions and multi-candidate elections generated the political system, without the disputing the leading role of the CPSU. The vanguard of reformist democracy in CEE (Poland and Hungary), started the reconstruction on the idea of democratic centralism in the Communist parties, permitting the platforms inside the party for an effective discussion on socialist future. Meanwhile, constitutionality and its questions emerged as the main social problem. Yet, pluralism was the idea which made re-contested the concept of democracy. Pluralism, another term used by Gorbachev regularly in 1988-1989, denoted the autonomic spheres and exchanges under the benevolent umbrella of the party. The democratic transitions came when pluralism was applied to the concept of democracy, that is, the official concept of democracy disintegrates, and became re-contested. Political forces used this contestation for define their own democracy concept, which led to pacted transitions (Poland, Hungary), the collapse of ruling Communist parties (Czechoslovakia, GDR) or political chaos (Rumania, Albania, and later Yugoslavia).

³¹ John Gooding: Gorbachev and Democracy. *Soviet Studies*, 42 (2) 1990. pp. 195-231.



Conclusion: ‘real democracy’ never comes (?)

In one of his interview, Jacques Derrida was asked about his idea, democracy to come or *démocratie à venir*. He replied, as the following: “The idea of a promise is inscribed in the idea of a democracy: equality, freedom, freedom of speech, freedom of the press - all these things are inscribed as promises within democracy. Democracy is a promise. That is why it is a more historical concept of the political - it's the only concept of a regime or a political organisation in which history, that is the endless process of improvement and perfectibility, is inscribed in the concept.”³² Similarly, communist concepts of democracy also had promises inscribed in the idea of democracy: the promise of progress and the perfection of the society in the near future. For this, they used the term of ‘people’, as a new basis of the coming perfect society. The subjects of ‘people’s democracy’ were de-contested as a self-educated man of common sense, with revolutionary thinking. Socialist democracy described the same subject in the period of developed socialism as a self-managing communal man, with full of state-consciousness. In the experiment of Gorbachev’s reforms this subject was re-politicized, as the repository of social and political renewal. At the same time, these subjects were also the objects of democracy, their transformation and evolution was preconditioned by the working of democratic mechanisms. The reforms meant for time to time a wider inclusion of Socialist citizens in the renewal and progress of state socialism.

³² *Politics and Friendship. A Discussion with Jacques Derrida*. Centre for Modern French Thought, University of Sussex, 1 December 1997. (2014. July 27.) Retrieved from <http://hydra.humanities.uci.edu/derrida/pol+fr.html>



Meanwhile, Communist regimes maintained the utopia of the coming of the New Man, or a new society. They promised of the coming of ‘real democracy’, but for this, they expected from the people to act as ‘real democracy’ would have been in its existence. Rousseau’s skeptical statement in the Social Contract on real democracy should be true the democratic utopias of Communism as well: “If we take the term in the strict sense, there never has been a real democracy, and there never will be. It is against the natural order for the many to govern and the few to be governed. It is unimaginable that the people should remain continually assembled to devote their time to public affairs, and it is clear that they cannot set up commissions for that purpose without the form of administration being changed.”³³

³³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau: *On the Social Contract*. Book III, Chapter 4. (On democracy)

