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Editorial │ Surveillance from a Post-Communist Perspective

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Abstract

This special issue is the result of a research initiative that began in 2013, just before the annexation of Crimea by Russia. We, the guest editors, together with Paweł Waszkiewicz at the University in Warsaw, wanted to fill a gap in research on surveillance, which had at that time not yet addressed post-communist societies to any great extent. Today the situation is slightly different, but the need for further research is still pressing. It is therefore with great pleasure that we present a collection of five research articles by both senior and early-stage researchers, as well as a postscript by Professor Emeritus Maria Łoś, who is one of the few researchers who has written extensively on surveillance-related issues from a post-communist perspective. Below we introduce the special issue with a conceptual overview of post-communist research and its connections to surveillance studies.

Introduction

> *We thought we'd leave communism behind and everything would turn out fine. But it turns out you can't leave this and become free, because people don't understand what freedom is.*

Svetlana Alexievich, in *The Guardian*, July 21, 2017 (Walker 2017)

Many sources could be used to introduce a special issue on surveillance and post-communism. Svetlana Alexievich, one of the keenest observers of post-communism in our time, here summarises much of what has been written on the topic. At the same time, she opens up the very complicated relationship between post-communism and surveillance that is the topic of this issue of *Surveillance & Society*. The socialist state—both a repressive machinery and a guarantor of social security—to many observers created a particular kind of citizenship, built on a schizophrenic relationship to freedom (see, for example, Levina 2017). Surveillance arguably still plays a key role in this relationship. An important question asks how long should we continue to talk about post-communism, and what role does the forty-five to seventy years of "real socialism" play today? In this special issue, five contributions touch on this issue in different ways: from the value of online privacy to security sector reform. As the tide in several post-communist countries, as elsewhere, now seems to shift away from democratisation, it is particularly important to understand the delicate nature of continuity and discontinuity of surveillance, security, and politics in post-communist societies.

This special issue on surveillance in post-communist societies aims to connect surveillance studies, in

which post-communist societies are somewhat of a blind spot, with post-communist studies, which suffer from a similar condition with regard to surveillance. As researchers from formerly communist societies increasingly publish their works in English rather than their native languages, the international audience is presented with new insights of surveillance politics, culture, and resistance, much of which is ingrained with the modern history of the Soviet Union and Central and Eastern Europe. This special issue presents a selection of works by scholars who, in various ways, shed light on processes and politics of surveillance in post-communist societies, a term that we will discuss further. In some respects, readers from other parts of the world will recognise the phenomena discussed by the authors, whereas in others, the issues at hand are so contingent upon the historical and cultural context that they are completely unique. Before we present these works, we situate the thematically oriented special issue in a more general problematisation of post-communism.

Post-Communism: Pseudo-Category or Cultural Legacy?

Surveillance was a key aspect of daily life in the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Despite vast differences between societies, using informants and phone wiretapping were endemic.[1] Albeit variable over time and between countries, surveillance permeated to a higher or lesser extent the communist regimes, as it was the very foundation of their mode of government. During the years from 1989 to 1991, almost all communist governments in Europe fell; the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries as well as the break-away states of the Soviet Union initiated transformations to democracy and capitalism. "Post-communism" was coined as a concept grouping these "liberated" but yet not fully "westernized" states together. But what does it mean? Post-communism seems to suggest an in-betweenness, a transport route between communism and that which comes after (Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2013). Or is it so? Political scientists have argued in the context of Ukraine, for example—this was before the events of 2013/14—that post-communism may have become a stable state rather than a transformation phase (as described by Levitsky and Way 2010; see also Ekman 2009). There is a sizeable amount of work that tries to fill this concept with meaning in one way or another. Below we discuss different understandings of post-communism with a focus on its explanatory power and try to disentangle its relevance from a surveillance studies perspective.

Approaches to Post-Communism

One may first think of post-communism descriptively, as a *time period*, that is, "the time after communist rule." There are claims that the post-communist period lasted for about ten years until roughly the year 2000 (Korek 2004) or that it ended with the EU enlargement in 2004. It follows from this "minimalist" understanding that what merits the term may have possessed before, it is now inadequate to describe the realities in the CEE more generally. The communist rule, by extension, should ontologically be understood as limited to its actual duration; it has no a priori implications on social and political processes today. But others, such as Tucker (2015) and Alexievich as quoted in the introduction, argue that the communist legacy has had considerably more profound impact. These observers tend to view *legacies* of communism (and surveillance) as a way of making sense of the world. Wittenberg (2015) identifies three different fields where it may be appropriate to speak about legacies of communism: cultural (attitudes, beliefs), material (infrastructure, industrial structure), and institutional (weak party system, centralised economy planning). Surveillance practices certainly also belong in all three. As social scientists it is mainly the cultural and the institutional aspects of post-communism and surveillance that are of most interest. Here we find two strands in the literature: culturalist and performance-oriented perspectives. As a representative of the former, Levina writes:

> To think of surveillance as a cultural practice is therefore to accept that its apparatuses
> give individuals meaning. And these affective utterances of pride, belonging, and sacrifice

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[1] We desist from lengthy discussion of the communist period, since we have written about this elsewhere (Svenonius, Björklund, and Waszkiewicz 2014).

cannot be dismissed as inauthentic or false simply because they were produced by and through surveillance. (Levina 2017: 534)

Peoples' emotions, their view of the world, values, and anxieties are inflexible attitudes that do not change quickly; further, they may last for generations. If this is the case, certainly this has implications for politics and civil society as well as for every sector in society.

Post-communism as *culture*, then, is defined by the legacies of communism and a way of living that was radically different from, for example, Western Europe. In this view the monopolisation of most aspects of social organisation during the communist years has left its mark, and post-communism can therefore be understood in terms of cultural, institutional, and individual "trauma." To borrow a concept from Bourdieu, individuals in post-communist societies display a general "habitus" of communism as a result of political socialisation before 1989 (Székely 2010: 165–66; Sztompka 2000, 2001). The idea of a *homo sovieticus*[2] is perhaps the most well-known albeit outdated illustration of this understanding of post-communism, according to which the particular communist subjectivity includes several characteristics detrimental to the democratic ideal, such as:

- inability to separate one's own and others' interests
- "learned helplessness"—life is essentially controlled by external factors
- focus on informal social networks to compensate for lack of support from public institutions
- distrust of political institutions
- value dimorphism or "doublethink" in Orwell's terms; it signifies the creation of public and private personas
- security triumphs over political rights and autonomy
  (Levina 2017; Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2011; Tyszka 2009)

The culturalist idea of post-communism focuses on the problem of subjectivity and the disparity between citizenship ideals in "real socialism" and its democratic counterparts. Whereas the democratic citizen should ideally be politically active and put confidence in public institutions' efficiency, the citizen under communism was socialised to be politically active only on command, and the economic circumstances of "real existing socialism" forced citizens to create localised networks of trust beyond the political and social institutions (Sztompka 2008). Individuals learned to apply the infamous "doublethink," that is, the double moral standards in public and private life, and to cope with the risk of being susceptible to secret surveillance at all times. Again, this is well described by Levina:

> The dissonance between the everyday life and the Party ideals was psychologically draining and such life required doublespeak enacted as an act of self-surveillance and perhaps even self-care. This self-surveillance produced a subjectivity that believed and did not believe; knew and did not know; remembered and forgot. Survival in a corrupt authoritarian regime, which long ago stopped believing its own lies, required a suspension of dis/belief. Surveillance has become therefore a continuous performative exercise. (Levina 2017: 531)

Finally, the homo sovieticus tends to accept the idea of giving up freedom and autonomy in exchange for (perceived) ontological and physical security. Paradoxically, the result is a subjectivity that distrusts "the system" while at the same time relying heavily on the state's capacity to provide security and a means of sustenance (see also Matejova 2018). As the opposite pole from the descriptive understandings of post-communism, this line of thought fills the concept with a quite specific and sometimes ideological meaning.

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[2] The term was coined by Aleksandr Zinovyev in 1984 and later popularised after 1989 by among others Józef Tischner and Piotr Sztompka. It can at best be understood as a theoretical proposition to be studied empirically, at worst an ideologically biased stereotype that actively undermines the democratising efforts by assigning blame for political problems to the people (as argued by Tyszka 2009: 520–21).

A competing *rationalist* perspective rejects the culturalist approach in favour of the idea that the difference between societies with and without communist experiences is basically negligible. The democratic deficit, the lack of trust, and the high levels of corruption that we witness in Eastern Europe are all outcomes of rational behaviour in societies where public and political institutions do (still) not work properly. The post-communist countries do not differ in any respect from other parts of the world that have experienced similar problems. As Clark (2002) argued, what we see is a matter of strategic struggles of interest between rational actors. In a sense, the label "post-communist" has little meaning in this understanding and becomes more of a (seemingly) neutral geopolitical categorisation. Using a geopolitical definition, the countries identified as post-communist are typically described as characterised by comparatively high levels of corruption and low levels of trust, both in political institutions and between people in general (Kostadinova 2012; Lovell 2001; Sapsford and Abbott 2006). Post-communist here refers simply to the fact that twenty-five to thirty years ago, they were all ruled by socialist governments.

In the social sciences, the rationalist and culturalist perspectives represent the extremes of a spectrum in the debate about post-communism.[3] The former view would hesitate to assume any existence of cultural legacies of communism beyond economic and political performance of political institutions, whereas the latter tends to overemphasise them (Clark 2002: 4ff). The culturalist understanding of post-communist legacies is problematic because of the ease with which it is used to label social phenomena as "legacies" in former communist states (see Wittenberg 2015). The label "post-communist" is often assumed a given without much idea of its fundamental assumptions or by tacitly assuming a stable ontological status of cultural legacies. In this context, the label "post-communist" may reflect a Western discourse, an ideological way of semantically underplaying complexity in the problematisation of a geopolitical Other that blocks the view from more accurate explanations. The rationalist understanding, on the other hand, which in social science leans towards rational choice models, tends too easily to downplay tradition and social institutions that may very well be pertinent in current political events. In the end it is a matter of what theory one subscribes to—culturalist or rationalist (Mishler and Rose 2005). The contemporary authoritarian politics in, for example, Hungary and Poland serve as excellent examples in this context: How should observers relate to the portions of the populations who advocate more authoritarian policies? Should we understand them in terms of homo sovieticus or rather as rational reactions to the corrupt and inefficient public sector, the effects of EU membership, or globalisation? Questions like these cannot be answered easily.

Tracing the Post-Communist "Effect"

The empirical literature on post-communism is today fairly large and is increasingly venturing well beyond the a priori assumptions made in social and political theory (Bennich-Björkman 2007; Bernhard and Karakoç 2007; Hanson 2017; Kostadinova 2012; Pjesivac 2017; Pop-Eleches 2007; Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2011). It revolves mainly around the questions of whether there are specific legacies from the communist regimes, whether the above description is a more general tendency in post-authoritarian societies, and what mechanisms produce observed outcomes (Bugaric 2015; Pjesivac 2017; Seleny 2007).[4] Much of the literature relies on survey data to study the possible effects of communism on today's political and social processes. The data from the World Value Survey and European Social Survey suggest some common traits in former communist societies:

- comparatively low levels of interpersonal and institutional trust
- low levels of political participation or political apathy
- high levels of corruption, both in high-level politics and in everyday life
- low tolerance for socially marginalised groups

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[3] See also Svenonius and Björklund (2018) for a similar discussion.
[4] Similar issues have been discussed in Spain, for example (Svenonius 2010: 316).

(Bernhard and Karakoç 2007; Denk, Christensen, and Bergh 2015; Hooghe and Quintelier 2014; Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2011, 2013)

Whether these traits are attributable to a communist legacy or whether they are effects of post-communist transformation itself is currently discussed in the literature. In the former case, the effects should be similar across all post-communist societies and be reduced by natural causes as elderly citizens pass away (generational effect). In the latter case, the effects should be mitigated once transformation becomes more complete (institutional effect). There should also be considerable variance between countries that have passed through different stages of transformation (see Mitropolitski 2016). The results of existing surveys point to a mixed picture: institutional performance explains most of the post-communist variables, such as low trust in political institutions (Hooghe and Quintelier 2014; Pjesivac 2017), but there are studies that show residuals that cannot be "explained away," such as confidence in political parties and civil society engagement (Bernhard and Karakoç 2007; Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2011, 2013; Svenonius and Björklund 2018). Pop-Eleches and Tucker (2013) have accentuated the generational effect of totalitarianism. According to their analysis, living under communism during the formative years in one's youth has a significant effect on trust in political parties, but Hooghe and Quintellier (2014) point to the absence of such an effect and to the primacy of bad governance and corruption. In our recent study, in turn, we find traces of both types of effects (Svenonius and Björklund 2018). In sum, the empirical support from existing survey data does not substantiate either perspective, but institutional performance seems to be more important in explaining the factors mentioned above.

Hence, we are back to where we started: post-communism may denote a variety of things, but it seems difficult to escape the in-betweenness. With increasing experiences from a more democratic regime and as older generations perish, the post-communist variables will probably lose what relevance they may have. Since poor institutional performance and leadership seem to explain most of what post-communism is thought to be, this would explain the variation between former communist societies.

Surveillance Research in a Post-Communist Setting

If post-communist studies are characterised by the debate between culturalist and performance-oriented perspectives, surveillance studies have been rather silent when it comes to post-authoritarianism in general—and Central and Eastern Europe in particular. A few works go into more detail, particularly where legacies of post-authoritarianism or post-communism are actively related to surveillance in one respect or the other. Chiara Fonio and Stefano Agnoletto (2013), for example, discuss the organisational, institutional, and personal continuities in post-fascist Italy using archival material; Maria Łoś (1995, 2003, 2005; Łoś and Zybertowicz 2000), in her many publications on the situation in Poland, draws on a wealth of material in her research on the transformation of the Polish security sector. Her main argument is that the intelligence service before 1989, *Służba Bezpieczeństwa*, effectively manipulated the regime change and secured a high degree of influence in the subsequent democratic regime. Common for these works is a focus on corruption, discretionary powers of public servants, and the continuity of the former authoritarian regimes in public institutions.[5]

The communist systems for security and surveillance practices per se are well documented in previous research (see Persak and Kamiński 2005), but one of the contributions in this volume provides new data that alters our previous understanding of surveillance during communism at the same time as it sheds light on the similarities and differences with contemporary practices. Daniela Richterova, in her contribution "Terrorists and Revolutionaries: The Achilles Heel of Communist Surveillance," argues that monitoring non-conforming citizens in Czechoslovakia in the '70s and '80s was not an entirely coherent activity. As Richterova shows, the Czechoslovak authorities experienced great difficulties trying to manoeuvre the

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[5] However, the evidence is at times impressionistic and difficult to verify.

different groups and individuals that were not their typical targets, such as international terrorists. Even the extensive system of informers and technical surveillance could not manage to control the terrorists, who grew to be increasingly problematic for the Czechoslovak authorities. The text shows with great clarity the limitations of authoritarian systems of surveillance that were mainly directed towards their own population. Picking up the stick a bit further down the road, Lavinia Stan and Marian Zulean highlight the continuity between the communist and the present regime, focusing on security sector reform in Romania. In their contribution "Intelligence Sector Reforms in Romania: A Scorecard," the reader is presented with a rather bleak view of the feasibility of fundamentally democratising a post-communist intelligence community characterised by continuity in both networks, operations, and institutional structures. If the intelligence community sees little advantage in lustration and transparency, such reforms will not take place or will be ineffective. Stan and Zulean's contribution shows us with great clarity the difficulties in tackling institutional legacies—insights that help us understand contemporary politics in post-communist societies beyond the Romanian case.

Coming from a media studies perspective, Rachid Gabdulhakov, in his contribution "Citizen-led Justice in Post-Communist Russia: From Comrades' Courts to Dotcomrade Vigilantism," demonstrates the link between communist surveillance practices and contemporary modes of interpersonal monitoring. The model of citizen-led courts engaged on behalf of the authorities in correcting fellow citizens' non-orthodox behaviour feeds into internet-based activities with similar purposes in present-day Russia. His contribution shows how seemingly disparate phenomena of peer-to-peer, extra-legal systems of justice can be set in a historical context. Gabdulhakov's contribution is situated in the interface between culture, infrastructure, and institutions, in Wittenberg's (2015) terminology presenting the reader with both a bizarre and brutal image of repressive tendencies in contemporary Russian society.

Also a media scholar focusing on Russia, Tetyana Lokot, in her contribution "Be Safe or Be Seen? How Russian Activists Negotiate Visibility and Security in Online Resistance Practices," focuses on the ways that Russian civil rights activists negotiate the rigid online surveillance by intelligence agencies. Using a virtual ethnographic approach, she discusses how activists weigh the need to be seen or heard and the need to protect themselves and their data in a context of high-intensity digital surveillance. By applying what Lokot calls "conspicuous security practices," activists display known surveillance cases against them and so turn the oppressive security apparatus to a source for voicing criticism against the regime at large. While in Western democracies, activists may not have to devote as much attention to their own personal security, the analysis shows how countersurveillance can function in authoritarian societies.

The most advanced *quantitative* analysis engaging in public attitudes to surveillance has to date been carried out by the PRISMS project, which did not identify any effects particular to post-communist societies in their data (Friedewald, Van Lieshout, and Rung 2016), and Budak, Anić, and Rajh (2011, 2012; 2015), who published several works focusing on the Western Balkans. The latter authors report very interesting results that expand the picture provided by the Globalization of Personal Data (GPD) survey (Zureik et al. 2010). Croatian citizens are concerned about privacy but have relatively little faith in the safeguards provided by public institutions. The present volume contains a new contribution by Budak and Rajh, "Citizens' Online Surveillance Concerns in Croatia," in which the authors develop their analysis with special focus on the Croatian case. The analysis shows the existence of two clusters of internet users in Croatia who display very different characteristics. The first consists of people with high levels of surveillance concern in combination with lower levels of trust in institutions, in people, and in the quality of privacy regulation. The second cluster consists of people with lower levels of surveillance concern and higher levels of trust in institutions, people, and privacy regulations. Since elderly citizens are overrepresented in the first cluster, there are reasons to ask whether attitudes mirror a communist experience that the elders have but the relatively young people do not.

We hope that the works collected in this special issue will constitute the beginning of a livelier academic

debate on surveillance in post-communist societies and post-authoritarian societies more generally. To be sure, much work remains to be carried out—not only on potential legacies of the past but also on contemporary politics of surveillance.

Acknowledgments

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