

The Ion Ratiu Democracy Lecture
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Are There Democracy Lessons Arabs Can Learn From Eastern Europe?
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I did not have the privilege of knowing the late Ion Ratiu in person during his lifetime. I had heard of him some fifteen years ago, however, as we began to take interest in the great transition of eastern and central Europe from totalitarianism to democracy. When the Ratiu Foundation honored me a few months ago with notice of this award in his name, I started on a voyage to rediscover this man. Through him I came to know more about Romania, of whose modern history he was an integral part. Along the way, I became convinced that the larger story of the fall of communism -- and the dictators who ruled in its name -- has much to teach us in the Arab world.

My search uncovered countless and surprising parallels between Romania and Egypt. As I delved deeper into Ion Ratiu's biography, I would discover several personal similarities with my own -- most important being that we were seduced early in life by extraordinary foreign women, Elizabeth (whom I had the pleasure of getting to know a bit yesterday evening) and Barbara, who became our lifelong partners. More recently, both of us were unsuccessful but nonetheless determined candidates for the presidency of our respective countries. Both Romania and Egypt suffered from their proximity to the Ottoman Empire for centuries, and both chafed under native tyranny for most of the last hundred years. At the end of the 20th century, both Romania and Egypt were prime examples of what social scientists call "failed states," governments that are morally, politically, and fiscally bankrupt. As a result, both Dr. Ratiu and I had to live out significant parts of our adult lives in exile from the place where we were born.

The Third Democratic Wave

Romania and Egypt are parts of respective regional neighborhoods, groupings of countries that have been impacting the political trajectories of both nations, often in a negative manner for much of modern history. Further south and west in Europe, fifteen years before the fall of Ceausescu, three other long time dictatorships had crumbled --- in Portugal, Spain, and Greece. But the Eastern European neighborhood was in the Soviet orbit, making change slower and much more difficult. Romania and its fellow communist neighbors would have to wait.

In the same era, two other major regions went through similar transitions to democratic governance, Latin America and East Asia. Taken together, these transitions are what Samuel Huntington would describe later as the Third Wave of Democracy. Finally, the wave returned to Eastern Europe, starting with the gradual changes in Poland in 1980 and ending with the fall of the Ceausescu regime in Romania on December 25, 1989.

More than three decades later, we can reflect and draw lessons from the experiences of the Third Wave that swept over some seventy countries. These transitions are so important, that Seymour Martin Lipset, Samuel Huntington, and Larry Diamond pioneered a sub-field in social science called transitology. Many of the transitologists have noted that the Third Wave is now reaching some countries in sub-Saharan Africa, where the legacies of colonialism, racism and poverty presented formidable obstacles. Until now, the Third wave has unfortunately by-passed the Arab World. This observation has, in turn, given rise to a plausible proposition about so-called Arab or Muslim 'exceptionalism'—the idea that something unique to Arab culture or political traditions makes the region unfriendly to democracy.

I have long been on record as rejecting this proposition. When we examine it closely on theoretical, empirical, and historical grounds, all point to the fact that such propositions are ethnocentric at best and outright racist at worst. Romania is a case that nicely proves this point. Only one year before the fall of Ceausescu, several authors spoke of "Romanian Exceptionalism", based on the fact that the country trailed far behind its neighbors politically and economically. For ten years following the march of the

Solidarity Movement challenging Communism in Poland, there was hardly a sign of social let alone political protest in Romania. Ion Ratiu seemed to be singing alone, far away in exile, with hardly any echo in the Romanian hinterland. At least, that is how it looked to outside observers.

At the time, there were seemingly good reasons for the assertion of Romanian Exceptionalism. Other Eastern European countries had histories of one or more uprisings against Communist rule, albeit unsuccessful; for example Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. It was reasoned that a whole generation of Romanians who had grown up since WWII had no tradition or collective memory of fighting for freedom. Worse still, Romania was the only country in Eastern Europe by the second half of the twentieth century that combined brutal authoritarian rule with stifling totalitarianism, under the diabolical architecture of Ceausescu. Not since Stalin or Hitler had any European country seen such a notorious combination. No wonder Ceausescu was the only ruler invariably described as both Stalinist, in the manner of Kim Jung Il of North Korea, and Sultanic, in the spirit of classic oriental despotism.

Relying on an elaborate and merciless secret police, known as the *Securitate*, Ceausescu managed to break down the entire Romanian population. Having internalized fear in all his subjects and feeling in total control of the country, he and his family had no fear of their own. So much so that despite turmoil and regime changes all around, Ceausescu felt confident enough to leave Romania on a state visit to the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1989. It was his last hurrah. Romanian exceptionalism was never heard from again as the events of that year unfolded. More on this below.

The Many Roads to Democracy

So the first lesson from Romania to us Arab democrats is never to despair from waiting for Godot. There will always be a historical moment in which the forces which have been gathering under the surface will emerge to produce the *coup de grace* against tyrants. No society is eternally immune from change and development. As a matter of fact, Romania, like many other countries on the six continents, has proven the fallacy of exceptionalism.

We heard earlier claims that Catholics, Germans, and Japanese were incapable of becoming true democrats. The fact that Romania's transition began 10 years after Poland's, did not really matter in the long scheme of historical evolution. Even the forty years of communist rule proved to be an aberration of sorts, when one considers the longer path that Romania has taken, starting with the Renaissance through the Enlightenment to the democratic revolution at the end of the 20th century. The Romanian delay was longer compared to its neighbors, and more brutal, and that may explain the level of violence when the final transition came.

The roads to democracy taken earlier by neighboring countries show the diversity by which different societies achieve a common goal of human liberty. Thus, in Poland, the pioneer in overturning communist rule, it was workers at the helm. With no precedent to guide them, the splinter trade union of shipyard workers had to learn by trial and error how to confront and ultimately defeat a totalitarian system. Over time, they evolved a tool kit to isolate their state foes using internal, regional, as well as international assets. The Roman Catholic Church was a crucial international force that supported the Polish struggle. Solidarity also had to create a wedge between internal security forces and the Polish army in order to reduce the chances of the regime using massive force to crush the dissident trade union.

Reformists patiently waited until the moment was right, in 1985 when Gorbachev came to power in the Soviet Union, declaring his own reform package under the title of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Even more important to Solidarity and other reformists in Poland was Gorbachev's repeal of the Brezhnev Doctrine in favor of a non-interventionist approach to the Warsaw Pact countries. Solidarity's charismatic leader, Lech Walesa, slowly built up his people's confidence to challenge the Communist regime. Nearly a decade later, in 1989, Solidarity and its allies won the Presidency, taking all seats in the Sejm (lower House) and 99 out of 100 seats in the Senate.

Hungary was the next to oust the communists from power in a peaceful and far less dramatic manner than Poland. The replacement of the General Secretary of the

Hungarian Communist Party, Janos Kadar, in 1988 was the ultimate trigger for major reforms to occur. As in Poland, there was no Soviet interference as Hungarians re-instituted a multi-party system, unlike in 1956. Reform came from a wing within the Communist Party itself, taking their clue from both Poland and the Soviet Union. The reform wing was able to persuade party hard-liners to pre-empt a possible revolution by initiating a gradual evolution. The major reforms of 1988 were called the “Democracy Package,” which allowed trade union pluralism; freedom of association, assembly, and press; proposed a new electoral law; and a revision of the constitution. Only a year later in 1989, they changed the name of the Hungarian Communist Party into the Hungarian Socialist Party. New legislation was adopted by the renamed Republic of Hungary, which entailed multi-party parliamentary elections, direct presidential elections, guaranteed civil rights, and mechanisms to separate the three distinct branches of government. With the adoption and implementation of these measures, Hungary’s transition was just as peaceful and orderly as Poland’s.

Czechoslovakia’s Velvet Revolution would soon follow. One week after the fall of the Berlin Wall, street demonstrations began simultaneously in Prague and other cities by students, artists, and intellectuals. Earlier in 1977, under the moral leadership of a playwright, Vaclav Havel, a campaign for civil and political rights was launched, starting with a charter signed by seventy-seven dissidents, and bearing the name Charter 77. Strong persecution by the government forced them underground until the late 80s, when new groups, associations, and trade unions joined the resistance by signing on to Charter 77. To avoid violent response from the Soviets or Czech Communist Party, the dissidents resolved to only use peaceful means and subsumed their activities under a Civic Forum. This non-violent approach did not spare Havel and his associates, as they still faced several arrests, trials and imprisonments. At one of the student demonstrations, riot police used force to disperse the crowd, hoping to invoke fear among other would-be demonstrators. A secret police agent Ludvik Zifcak posed as dead, remaining in the public square for hours for passersby to see.

This only provoked more citizens to join the protests. From Nov 17th to the 27th, demonstrations in Prague grew to an estimated half a million from an initial crowd of 2000. The Army was called upon to bring an end to the situation before it spiraled out of control, but the Minister of Defense refused to give the order to take action against Czechoslovak people. Shortly afterward, state radio and television joined the strike. Eventually, on December 10th, President Gustav Husak resigned, after appointing the first majority non-communist government since 1948.

Bulgaria was not much different from the previous four countries. Protests leading to the eventual downfall of the Communist Party began in February 1990. Under pressure, President Zhivkov ordered labor camps closed, expressed official regret for previous trials and executions of dissidents, declared limited freedom of expression restored, and ended persecution of the Church. Importantly, he also announced some agricultural reforms which were deemed insufficient by the cultivators, who were ethnic Turks who had fled during earlier campaigns of assimilation. They swelled the numbers as crowds continued to mass in the streets demanding further reforms and democratization. This ultimately led to the first free elections in June of 1990, marking the end of communist rule. Zhivkov faced trial for his actions in 1991.

Regional Neighborhood

In the height of the Prague uprising, a large poster hung from a tall building in the central square with the following text:

“Poland took ten years, Hungary took ten months, East Germany took ten weeks, Czechoslovakia? Let us do it in ten days!”

In fact, they came very close to that goal, needing only two days longer to topple the regime. The Romanian dissidents, who were the last to revolt against their ruling regime, could just as easily have hung a similar poster, with the added line: Romania in ten hours. That is exactly how long the final coup de grace took to bring down one of the most brutal dictators in Europe, Ceausescu.

The poster illustrates just how important the role of one's regional neighborhood is in expediting change, in this case, toward democracy. Poland led the way and for this reason took the longest. Successive countries learned that it was possible for citizens to organize and overthrow a dictatorship by first seeing it happen across the border. In each country dissidents learned from the mistakes and difficulties of their predecessors, which were followed eagerly through the media, allowing a much shorter time frame for each subsequent success.

Diversity of Leading Actors

Another lesson to be learned from Eastern Europe is that no single script was followed, neither in the initial active group nor events that ignited the first spark. In Poland it was a shipyard workers union angry about an increase in meat prices. In Hungary, it came from within the ruling party. In Czechoslovakia it was writers, artists, and students, sparked by the fall of the Berlin Wall. In Bulgaria, it was an uprising of scapegoated ethnic Turks. And in Romania, the spark was an uprising of the ethnic Hungarian minority. The initiating groups all managed to accomplish an essential first step: breaking the fear barrier that prevents people from acting.

This realization is humbling to Marxists, as well as social scientists who had assumed that certain classes hold the key for leading social transformation. The experience of these six countries in Eastern Europe taught us otherwise. Trigger groups and trigger issues can come from almost any corner of a society when the time is ripe.

The Role of Religion

In all six countries, religion had been suppressed by the communists ruling regimes and many ideologues had assumed that this institution was fading from human societies. The uprisings demonstrated otherwise. For one thing, the Roman Catholic Church was instrumental in bringing about the changes in Poland, by giving dissidents safe houses for underground printing and moral support for opposition activities. The Orthodox Church in Romania was an instrument in mobilization, due to its complete jurisdiction over its

followers. The factor of religion will prove to be important for Arab democrats as well, who are still struggling in their attempt to incorporate Islamists in their struggle against local dictators.

The Role of the Leader

Leadership is crucial in any social movement. The uprisings in Eastern Europe in the 80s and 90s are no exception to this rule. Though in all cases it was groups rather than individuals that triggered and then lead the movement, yet certain individuals came to symbolize each struggle. For example, in Poland it was Lesch Walesa, and in Czechoslovakia Vaclav Havel. Other than their charismatic qualities and organizational skills, these individual leaders put a human face to otherwise mass-based and impersonal movements.

One thing the East Europeans seem to have evolved is the art of collective leadership, something that the Arabs have not yet managed to create among themselves. One wonders whether this is one of the few positive aspects of totalitarian rule in Eastern Europe -- to downplay individualism and enhance collectivism as a style of political action. We in the Arab world are still looking for a 'great man of history' to lead us out of our troubles.

Noteworthy also is the fact that several Eastern European freedom fighters managed to escape their countries for the west, where they carried on a tenacious struggle over many years in exile. That gave their movements depth and external support that which otherwise have been lacking. George Soros and Ion Ratiu are prime examples; each in his own way has left a great legacy to the places they left behind.

The Role of External Powers

Many observers have noted the key role played by western powers through the 1975 Helsinki Accord, seeing it as essential in loosening the iron-clad control of states in Eastern Europe. Following years of manipulation by the Soviet Union, the Warsaw Pact countries were economically stressed because of the arms race and mismanagement of

their unwieldy public sectors by the early 1970's. They were suffering from food shortages, outmoded industry, a widening gap of information technology with the West, and desperately needed a way out.

Swallowing their pride, the leaders appealed to the West for help. When the western powers responded, it was accompanied by a set of conditions for receiving aid that revolved around human rights, opening public space for civil society, and allowing freedom of movement for citizens, including immigration. The Communist regimes did not realize at the time how these seemingly naïve set of demands –seen as ‘soft’ and generally unenforceable compared to the concrete aid they were receiving -- would take hold of their citizens. Little did they know that these promises to external powers of fundamental human liberties would help to hasten their down-fall.

We must not discount the important role of information and access to media as well. Twenty-five years before the Helsinki Accord, Radio Free Europe began beaming its daily anti-Communist news and analysis programs, offering citizens news about the internal affairs of each Eastern European country which they could not get from their own state-controlled media. In retrospect and after the fall of Communism, many eastern Europeans reported that Radio Free Europe and the BBC were, for years, their sole source of credible information.

Today the Arab world needs similar support from the free world. Conditional aid and putting teeth into expectations for minimal adherence to human rights standards in Arab countries would give heart to struggling democracy forces. Sadly, the fears surrounding terrorism and Islamist political movements have dampened even the few occasional impulses of western leaders to stand up to Arab dictators.

Learning from our Eastern counterparts

I have been struck in my recent reading by the geographic, economic, and cultural proximity of the Eastern European nations to the Arab world. Despite this reality, the Arabs have hardly considered Eastern Europeans as role models or looked to their

freedom fighters for support and to benefit from their rich experience. To be sure, Arab autocratic regimes did so during the 'honeymoon period' with the Soviet Union, from the mid 1950's to the 1970's. They bought military and industrial hardware, sent their officers for training, but mostly copied the secret police system as well as their torture techniques. Therefore we should perhaps not be surprised that present-day Arab democrats, most of whom are middle class and western educated, have developed a cool if not aversive attitude toward things Eastern European.

Despite the democratic revolutions that took place in that neighboring region, most Arab democrats continue to feel that there is little to be learned from that direction. The few who believe otherwise have not been able to translate their interest in Eastern European democratic transitions into systematic and programmatic exchange. This may be partly a result of language barriers and lack of familiarity with their Eastern European counterparts. Unfortunately, Arabs who knew the language and culture of these countries are mostly aging Marxists, military and police officers, or public sector technocrats, with little or no interest in democratic transition.

However, the last four years have witnessed a budding interest in the experiences of Eastern Europe. Initially this was sparked by Washington-inspired media and exchange programs modeled on those that had been successful in Eastern Europe. Traumatized by the horrific events of 9/11, Bush came to the conclusion that the perpetrators of religious extremism and terrorism come from Arab-Muslim-Middle Eastern countries whose ruling regimes, though close to the US, are autocratic or outright tyrannical. He resolved to stop supporting dictators and to promote democracy and Arab democrats, using techniques and models that had proven effective a decade earlier.

In practice, the Bush democracy promotion policy proved to be quite erratic. At times, he used military means to target a nation, which 'liberated' the country but unleashed dangerous anti-democratic trends and ended up entangling the US in bloody protracted warfare. At other times, he led Arab democrats to expect steady support, then pulled back at the first sign of difficulty. This is sadly reminiscent of events in Hungary in 1956

and Czechoslovakia in 1968. Worse still, the Bush Administration now appears to have reverted back to full support of Arab autocrats out of fear of an exaggerated Islamic threat.

So there is a major difference in the Eastern European and Arab situations; we are not yet at the point of moral and political clarity, either in the US or in other Western democracies, as was the case during the Reagan-Thatcher years in the 1980's. Nor are these western democracies yet willing to use their leverage in trade, aid, and technology to force Arab autocrats to open up their political systems, as they once did with the regimes of Eastern Europe through the Helsinki Accord.

Other factors enter into the current political equation and make moral clarity difficult for western powers. The abundance of oil in the region, instead of being a blessing has turned into something of a curse. Too often, democracy in our region has been sacrificed for oil, as it had been previously for stability or Cold War advantages. For fifty years, the complex relationship of the west with Israel has confounded democracy promotion in Arab states. Recent events that began in Lebanon bring this point into focus.

After the assassination of the former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri on March 14 2005, a popular uprising broke out in which grief mixed with anger and combined with Western sympathy forced an end to a three-decade old Syrian occupation. Lebanese university students were the vanguard of the uprising. They marched in the streets of Beirut and camped out in public squares day in and day out until the last Syrian soldier left Lebanese soil. Democracy of a fragile sort was restored in Lebanon shortly after.

Those events were affectionately labeled the Cedar Revolution. It is the closest an Arab nation has come to something resembling the Czech Velvet, Ukraine Orange, or Georgian Rose Revolutions. Lebanon began to look like the start of a success story in its own right, and it triggered events elsewhere in the region that suggested democracy might finally arrive to Arab shores. The few months following the Cedar Revolution witnessed

11 elections - in Palestine, Iraq, Egypt, Kuwait and even in Saudi Arabia. It looked to some like an Arab 'spring of freedom'.

But that mood was short-lived. Newly-practiced electoral democracy brought to power Islamic Hamas in Palestine and 88 Muslim Brother deputies (out of 454) in Egypt. A year and half after the Cedar Revolution, a border war broke out between Israel and the Lebanese Hezbollah militias. Regardless of who was initially at fault — both sides were in my reading of events -- the fact that the US and other western democracies sided completely with Israel, which was systematically destroying much of Lebanon, threatened not only the fragile fruits of the Cedar Revolution, but also cast an ominous shadow on the era of American democracy promotion. In turn, those policies have hardened many Arabs against the beleaguered democracy advocates within the region, who begin to look like deluded western agents.

Unfortunately, the Arab Muslim Middle East will continue to suffer from this paradox for some time to come. Two competing values, those of national resistance and democratic governance, have been at odds for decades. A formula is yet to be found to reconcile the legitimate struggle for both. Eastern European societies were fortunate in that the two cherished values did not have to be traded off against one another or pursued simultaneously.

Another George has significantly influenced Arab democrats by offering support and funding for their fight. Mr. George Soros, just as determined but more consistent and subtle, has used the last five years to familiarize Arab democrats with the rich and diverse experiences of Eastern Europe. His Open Society Institute (OSI) has been working diligently with an assortment of civil society organizations in the Arab World. It sponsors conferences, workshops, and field visits for Arab activists to Eastern European countries. I participated in some of these activities, and along with my fellow Arab democrats, was impressed by the remarkable similarities between their pre-transitional conditions and those in our countries at present. Exchanges took place over such topics as what does and

what doesn't work in dealing with autocratic regimes; how to deflect police harassment and abuse; and most important how to manage fear and intimidation.

Open Society Institute has been working closely with civil society institutions in several Arab countries to build capacity and effectiveness. Similar programs have supported media and philanthropy. This kind of practical interaction, if sustained, could go a long way toward overcoming the current sense of discouragement among many Arab democrats. I take this opportunity to call on other veterans of the Eastern European democratic transition to become involved in this important project. Lend your rich experience to your Arab counterparts.

And finally, in thanking the Ratiu Foundation for the honor they have bestowed on me today, I take the liberty of urging them to consider deeper involvement in building a bridge between our two peoples. Sponsoring a program of exchange and mutual learning between our regions would be a lasting tribute to the memory of a great man, Ion Ratiu.