

Smart Talk  
No. 21

**Presenter**

Grzegorz Ekiert

**Moderator**

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**Discussants**

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This product presents a policy-oriented summary of the Smart Talk.

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Two Decades of Transformations in Central and Eastern Europe:  
Does the Communist Legacy Matter?

January 9, 2012

On January 9, 2012, the East Asia Institute invited Professor Grzegorz Ekiert, Harvard University, to discuss on the impact of the communist legacy in Central and Eastern Europe with the title of “Two Decades of Transformations in Central and Eastern Europe: Does the Communist Legacy Matter?”

The following are some of the main points of his presentation and the subsequent discussion with South Korean experts and scholars.

**Summary of the Seminar**

The collapse of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union brought about the end of communism in Central and Eastern Europe and ushered in a new era of democratization and liberalization. At the time, the prediction among some scholars was that the fate of these countries would be shaped by their communist legacy and would therefore resemble developments in Latin America or Africa. Twenty years later though, the outcome has not only been different from these predictions at the time but has also shown variation among the countries.

Professor Ekiert began his presentation with the puzzle of why the countries of Central and Eastern Europe manifested different outcomes despite their common experience of communism and Soviet domination. In this case, why does the communist legacy not matter in determining the paths that these countries have taken? Today two characteristics

define post-Communist Eastern Europe; diversity and a lack of convergence. Across all indicators, from political freedoms to economic performance, there is a distinct difference among these countries with some such as Poland achieving similar standards to Western Europe while other countries endure weak rule of law and negative economic gains.

This diversity of outcomes also defies some of the standard predictions about the communist legacies in each country. For example, it was argued that being part of the Soviet Union would influence outcomes, yet the Baltic countries have shown that it has little effect. The same goes for countries that pursued an independent path from the Soviet Union such as Romania and Yugoslavia who also each displayed different outcomes.

Rather than focusing on the communist legacy, answers can be found by going back to the past. Looking at the voting behavior in Poland in recent elections, there is an interesting pattern that relates to pre-communist legacies. The geographical divide between conservative and liberal voters in Poland relates closely to the divide between the German and Russian Empire 100 years ago. This curious legacy induces a need to take in a broader picture of how the past continues to live today.

Building on from this, Professor Ekiert put forward the explanation of Fernand Braudel’s work on *longue duree*, to explain the way in which “mentalities” carry across time. However, rather than just simply applying *longue duree* to answer this puzzle, Professor

Ekiert tried to apply a more different understanding of *longue duree* to explain the divergent outcomes in the post-Communist countries of Eastern Europe. Specifically, he points to the legacy of the nineteenth century when countries in Eastern Europe were forming and even pursuing early stages of democracy. These historical processes can be seen to have an impact on post-Communist developments. By taking on this approach, it is important to conceptualize the unit of analysis not as the nation-state but rather of trans-national groups or even “civilizations.”

The discussion mainly focused on different perspectives of the communist legacy in Eastern Europe. As Professor Ekiert emphasized a more long-term perspective, the discussants were interested to know how to compare that with the “transitology” perspective espoused by other scholars that tends to dismiss such historical legacies. Professor Ekiert believed that the “transitology” perspective tends to assess the cause and effect of changes too closely. The “transitology” perspective also does not consider the institutional choices by societies either, therefore placing too much emphasis on the role of elites.

Instead of only considering the role of elites, Professor Ekiert also believed that it is important to consider why societies in Eastern Europe selected the leaders they did. For example, it is noticeable that countries that exhibited weak civil societies before the communist legacy tended to go for presidential systems, while those with strong civil societies tended to choose parliamentary systems. Furthermore, the different historical experiences can also explain the varied communist systems in each country. ■

## About the Speaker

### Grzegorz Ekiert

Grzegorz Ekiert is Professor of Government and Senior Scholar at the Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies. His teaching and research interests focus on comparative politics, regime change and democratization, civil society and social movements, and East European politics and societies. He is the author of *The State Against Society: Political Crises and Their Aftermath in East Central Europe* (1996), *Rebellious Civil Society: Popular Protest and Democratic Consolidation in Poland*, with (Jan Kubik, 1999); *Capitalism and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe: Assessing the Legacy of Communist Rule*, (co-edited with Stephen Hanson, 2003) and editor of special issues of *East European Politics and Societies on the EU Eastward Enlargement* (with Jan Zielonka, 2003) and on *Democracy in Postcommunist World* (2007). His papers appeared in numerous social science journals and edited volumes. His current projects explore civil society development in new democracies in Central Europe and East Asia and patterns of transformations in postcommunist world. He was Acting Director of Harvard's Center for European Studies in fall 2010. He is also Senior Faculty Associate at Davis Center for Russian Studies, and Member of the Club of Madrid Advisory Committee.

### Discussants

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