

Schools and healthcare in some post-Soviet hybrid democracies have improved. How?

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*After the end of the Cold War some ex-communist countries embraced full democracy, some became hybrid regimes while others backslid to authoritarianism. **Andrea Cassani, Francesca Luppi, and Gabriele Natalizia** examined the quality of education and healthcare in these states. They found that while the more democratic a country the better its public services, some hybrid regimes have also managed to improve living standards. While this is good for ordinary people's social needs, it can also dampen down dissent and ensure the ruling hegemony stays in place.*



A classroom in School No. 2, Pripjat, Ukraine, photographed in 2012. Pripjat was evacuated after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986. Photo: [Michael Kötter](#) via a [CC-BY-NC-SA 2.0 licence](#)

The communist world has experienced radical transformation since the end of the Cold War. The move from state-planned to market economies led to the dismantling of existing welfare systems. The collapse of the Soviet Union, in turn, triggered a sequence of political transitions that invariably involved the introduction of democratic reforms.

Yet the regional record of political development is mixed. Democracy has consolidated in Central-Eastern Europe (albeit with some recent challenges in Poland and Hungary). Central Asia has backslid to authoritarianism. And in several former Soviet western and southern republics, hybrid political systems have emerged. In these regimes, democratic institutions – elections, multi-partyism, and political rights – coexist with persistently authoritarian practices, including restrictions on civil liberties and ballot rigging.

Democracy is often seen as a good in itself. Research on recent regime transitions in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa acknowledges that democratic institutions can encourage governments to turn their attention towards social issues. The competition for votes incentivises politicians to adjust their policy platforms to the preferences of the middle-lower class, typically a demographically relevant constituency. The threat of being voted out of office deters incumbents' rent-seeking behaviours, and stimulates higher spending on public goods. Beyond the electoral arena, other channels of political participation improve the communication between rulers and society, and facilitate the identification of policy issues.

But reconsidering these arguments in light of the peculiarities of the post-communist context – namely, the hybridisation of several post-Cold War regimes, and the often painful social implications of marketisation – raises the question of whether partial democratisation is sufficient, or whether only full democratisation ensures that governments heed the needs of society. We looked at 21 countries from the former Soviet Union and Central Eastern Europe, using data from the Polity IV Project, Freedom House, the Human Development Report, and regional expert knowledge. We show that **the more democratic a post-communist country is, the better the education and healthcare services. The most advanced democracies in the region, however, are not the only regimes able to improve living standards.**

The nine East-Central European countries which joined the European Union are the most successful cases of democratisation and the best performers, displaying levels of infant mortality and education comparable with their Western neighbours. The EU's role in restoring their welfare systems – a combination of aid and conditionality – should not be overlooked. Yet electoral competition and citizens' ability to voice their demands have been essential to ensure the inclusiveness of the health and education services, especially in Estonia and Latvia, where sizeable Russian minorities live.

Georgia and Ukraine were among the Soviet Union countries with the most efficient education and health systems. The transition to a market economy, however, was tough. Their welfare sectors have only just begun to recover. Despite persistent limitations to political participation and press freedom, and frequent electoral fraud especially at the local level, the Colour Revolutions that these countries experienced in 2003 and 2004 respectively spurred a renewal of the political elite. The effects of an increasingly competitive political process in Georgia are evident in the education reforms that Mikheil Saakashvili implemented in 2005 and 2009 after each of his election victories. Similarly, schools and healthcare have become core issues in the political agenda of some of the major Ukrainian parties (including Fatherland, the Party of Regions and Our Ukraine) since the 2006 parliamentary election.

By the end of the 1990s, Armenia's schools were faltering. Meanwhile, an economic crisis had struck the Russian health system. Recently, however, both governments have made remarkable progress in these sectors, as part of a broader strategy aimed at soliciting popular support through better socio-economic performance. Controlled competition does not challenge the status quo, so rulers in Russia and Armenia seem to learn about policy priorities through elections and protests. In 2011, following the mobilisation of opposition parties, civil society groups and medical staff, and five months after the legislative election in which United Russia suffered a 15 per cent drop in its vote, the government launched reforms of the national healthcare system. Likewise, in 2006 Robert Kocharyan started to modernise the Armenian school system as a response to mounting discontent, with the President considered chiefly responsible for the country's economic collapse.

Our research on post-communist countries confirms a positive correlation between democratisation and the well-being of ordinary citizens. The most significant and perhaps unexpected conclusion, however, is that some hybrid regimes have been able to improve citizen living conditions too. As different as Georgia and Ukraine are from Russia and Armenia, partial democratisation in these countries has drawn the government's attention to social needs. But we should not jump to any easy conclusions based on these findings. From a glass half-full perspective, in states where political freedom remains a chimera, political change that falls short of full democratisation nonetheless generates substantial returns for citizens – at least from a strictly socio-economic viewpoint. On the other hand, nominally democratic institutions can help governments overcome the information deficits which typically affect authoritarian politics. If they can then deliver services effectively, non-democratic elites can consolidate their hegemony – thus reducing the chance of leadership change and democratic progress.

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of Democratic Audit. The paper on which it is based is published in the [European Journal of Political Research](#), Volume 55, Issue 3, pages 512–530, August 2016.

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