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The East European Revolution of 1989: Is It Surprising that We Were Surprised?

By TIMUR KURAN*

Many aspects of the East European Revolution are controversial, but on one point everyone agrees: it caught the world by surprise. Even local dissidents were stunned by the sudden turn of events.

We will never know how many East Europeans *did* foresee the explosion of 1989. But at each step, accounts painted a picture of nations united in amazement. To my knowledge, only one study addresses the issue systematically. Four months after the breaching of the Berlin Wall, the Allensbach Institute asked a broad sample of East Germans: "A year ago did you expect such a peaceful revolution?" Only 5 percent answered "yes," though 18 percent responded "yes, but not that fast." Fully 76 percent admitted to being totally surprised. These figures are all the more remarkable given the I-knew-it-would-happen fallacy—the human tendency to exaggerate foreknowledge (Baruch Fischhoff and Ruth Beyth, 1975).

Yet in hindsight the revolution appears as inevitable. In each of the six countries the leadership was despised, economic promises remained unfulfilled, and basic freedoms existed only on paper. More importantly, winds of change in the Soviet Union were making Soviet intervention increasingly unlikely. But if the revolution was indeed inevitable, why was it not foreseen? What kept us from noticing signs that now, after the fact, are so plainly visible?

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I. Preference Falsification and Revolutionary Bandwagons

Consider a country featuring two camps competing for political power: government and opposition. Members of society, indexed by i, all place themselves publicly in one camp or the other, although a person may privately feel torn between the two camps. I am thus distinguishing between an individual's *private preference* and *public preference*. The former is effectively fixed at any instant, the latter a variable under his or her control. When his two preferences differ the individual is engaged in *preference falsification* (see my 1990a article).

Let S represent the size of the public opposition, expressed as a percentage of the population. Initially it is near 0, implying that the government commands almost unanimous public support. As a mass-supported seizure of political power, a revolution may be treated as an enormous jump in S.

Now take a citizen who wants the government overthrown. The likely impact of his own public preference on the government's fate is negligible, so his private preference plays no direct role in his choice of whether to side publicly with the opposition. His public preference depends on a tradeoff between two payoffs, one external and the other internal.

The external payoff to siding with the opposition varies positively with S. The larger S, the smaller the individual opponent's risk of being persecuted for his outspokenness, and the fewer hostile supporters of the government he has to face. The latter feature reflects the fact that government supporters, even those privately sympathetic to the opposition, participate in the persecution of dissidents, as part of their personal efforts to establish convincing pro-government credentials.

The internal payoff is rooted in the psychological cost of preference falsification: the suppression of one's wants generates lasting discomfort, the more so the greater the lie. Specifically, person i's internal payoff to supporting the opposition varies positively with his private preference, x^i. The higher x^i, the costlier he finds it to suppress his antigovernment feelings. An individual's private preference thus plays an indirect role in his choice of a public preference, as a determinant of his internal payoff to supporting the opposition.

Thus i's public preference depends on S and x^i. As S grows, with x^i constant, there comes a point where the external cost of joining the opposition is outweighed by the internal cost of self-suppression. This switching point is i's *revolutionary threshold*, T^i. Note that if x^i should rise, T^i will fall.

People with different private preferences and psychological constitutions may differ in their revolutionary thresholds. Imagine a ten-person society featuring the *threshold sequence* $A = \{0, 20, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 100\}$. Person 1 ($T^1 = 0$) supports the opposition regardless of its size, just as person 10 ($T^{10} = 100$) always supports the government. The remaining eight people's public preferences are sensitive to S. Initially, the opposition consists of a single person, or 10 percent of the population, so $S = 10$. Because the nine others have thresholds above 10, this S is self-sustaining.

This equilibrium happens to be vulnerable to a minor change in A. Suppose that person 2 has an unpleasant experience with the government, which exacerbates her alienation from the regime. The consequent rise in x^2 lowers T^2 from 20 to 10. Since $S = 10$, person 2 joins the opposition, moving S to 20. This new S is self-augmenting, as it drives person 3 into the opposition. The S of 30 then triggers a fourth defection, and in this manner S feeds on itself until it reaches 90—a new equilibrium. A slight shift in one individual's threshold has thus generated a *revolutionary bandwagon*, an explosive growth in public opposition.

Now consider the sequence $B = \{0, 20, 30, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 100\}$, which differs from A only in its third element: 30 as opposed to 20. As in the previous illustration, let T^2 fall from 20 to 10. Once again, the preexisting equilibrium becomes unsustainable, and S rises to 20. But the opposition's growth stops there, for the new S *is* self-sustaining. We see that a minor variation in thresholds may alter drastically the effect of a given perturbation.

Neither private preferences nor the corresponding thresholds are common knowledge. So a society can come to the brink of revolution without anyone knowing this—not even those with the power to unleash it, like person 2 in A.

For any number of reasons the threshold sequence may shift dramatically in favor of the opposition. But this will not necessarily trigger a revolution. In the sequence $C = \{0, 20, 20, 20, 20, 20, 20, 20, 60, 100\}$, the average threshold is as low as 30, possibly because in private most people sympathize with the opposition. Yet $S = 10$ remains an equilibrium.

When a revolutionary bandwagon does take off, long-repressed grievances burst to the surface. In addition, people who were relatively content embrace the new regime, attributing their former public preferences to fear of persecution. Reconsider A, recalling that a 10-unit fall in T^2 drives S from 10 to 90. The last person to jump on the bandwagon has a threshold of $T^9 = 80$, a reflection of her great sympathy for the government. Accordingly, she does not switch until the opposition's victory is guaranteed. Having made the switch, she has every reason to feign a longstanding antipathy to the old regime. In doing so, she makes it seem as though the old regime enjoyed even less genuine support than it actually did. This illusion is rooted in the very factor responsible for making the revolution a surprise: preference falsification. Its effect is to make it even less comprehensible why the revolution was unforeseen.

The outlined theory (for details, see my 1989, 1990b papers) unites social evolution and revolution, continuous and discontinuous change, in a single model. Private political preferences and the corresponding thresholds may shift gradually over a long

period during which public opposition is stable. When the cumulative change has established a *latent bandwagon*, a minor event may precipitate a sharp jump in public opposition.

II. The Revolution of 1989

Given communism's failures, the existence of East European dissent is easily understood. Less comprehensible is the rarity of dissent—prior, that is, to 1989. For decades, East Europeans displayed a remarkable capacity to put up with tyranny and inefficiency.

This subservience is attributable partly to punishments the communist establishment imposed on nonconformists. Yet official repression is only one factor in the durability of communism. It met with the approval of disillusioned citizens and relied crucially on their complicity. People with every reason to despise the status quo applauded politicians they mistrusted, joined organizations whose mission they opposed, and signed defamatory letters against dissidents they admired, among other manifestations of consent and accommodation.

In a famous essay, Václav Havel (1979) speaks of a greengrocer who places in his window the slogan "Workers of the World, Unite!" Why does he do this, Havel wonders, "Is he genuinely enthusiastic about the idea of unity among the workers of the world? Is his enthusiasm so great that he feels an irrepressible impulse to acquaint the public with his ideals? Has he really given more than a moment's thought to how such a unification might occur and what it would mean?" (p. 27). No, the greengrocer does not mean to express his real opinion about anything. He displays the slogan simply for the right to be left alone.

The greengrocer's prudence has an unintended consequence: it reinforces the perception of a society united behind the Party. It thus becomes a factor in other people's willingness to continue doing and saying the things expected of *them*.

Later in the same essay, "something in our greengrocer snaps" and he makes "an attempt to *live within the truth*" (p. 39). As a consequence, he is transferred to the warehouse at reduced pay, and his hopes for a holiday in Bulgaria evaporate. Also, his peers take to harassing him—not out of inner conviction but to avoid being persecuted themselves.

This brilliant vignette suggests that the regimes of Eastern Europe were substantially more vulnerable then the quiescence of their populations made them seem. Millions were prepared to turn against communist rule if ever this became safe to do.

What lowered the level of fear sufficiently to get the revolution underway? With the benefit of hindsight it appears that Gorbachev's reforms in the Soviet Union played a key role. In Eastern Europe these kindled hopes of greater independence and meaningful social change. But why did we not foresee where they would lead?

An examination of the news media before the revolution shows that arguments in the air pointed to the unlikelihood of fundamental change. Even if Gorbachev wanted to liberate Eastern Europe, it was not clear that he could. Surely, Soviet conservatives would insist on retaining their country's security belt. Moreover, tensions within the Soviet Union were sowing the seeds of a conservative coup. Some observers expected Gorbachev to survive, but only by reversing course and becoming increasingly repressive.

For all this pessimism, Gorbachev's policies did fuel expectations of a freer Eastern Europe, reducing the perceived risk of dissent. In terms of our model, they shifted the thresholds of East Europeans increasingly in favor of revolt, making it ever easier to spark an explosion. But obvious as this was, no one could see that public sentiment would shift so soon and so massively.

Pinpointing the specific event that pushed the bandwagon over the hill is akin to identifying the cough responsible for a flu epidemic. There were several turning points, any one of which might have altered history. One came when East German officials cancelled Party leader Honecker's order to fire on demonstrators in Leipzig. The demonstration's peacefulness made many more East Germans sense that change was im-

minent. Another turning point came with Gorbachev's remark that his country had no right to interfere in the affairs of its neighbors. At the time, some East European leaders were contemplating the use of force, and this statement may well have been a major factor in their exercising restraint.

When the greengrocers decide that they have had enough, Havel had predicted, East European communism will collapse like a house of cards. So it turned out: when the masses took to the street, support for the status quo just vanished. In one country after another a few thousand people stood up in defiance, joining long-persecuted activists. In so doing they encouraged additional citizens to drop their masks, which then impelled more onlookers to jump in. Before long, fear changed sides: where people had been afraid to oppose the regime, they came to fear being caught defending it. Party members rushed to burn their cards, claiming they were always reformists at heart. Top officials began sensing that they might face retribution for resistance. They hastened to accept the opposition's demands, only to be confronted with bolder ones (for a chronicle of events, see Timothy Garton Ash, 1990).

The East European Revolution has been billed as the triumph of truth over lying. This designation conveys the end of feigned support for communism, but it conceals the continuation of preference falsification. Lying has not ceased but changed character. Now it provides cover to East Europeans afraid to admit their yearnings for the old order.

III. Is It Surprising that We Were Surprised?

It is tempting to attribute our amazement at the events of 1989 to the inadequacy of our theories concerning political stability. Our most popular theories of revolution certainly left us ill-prepared for the suddenness with which public sentiment turned. For instance, Theda Skocpol's (1979) "structuralist" theory, which shows how changes in international relations can produce social uprisings, does not explain the involved discontinuities. A solid understanding of the interdependencies among individual public preferences (whose significance Skocpol explicitly rejects) would doubtless have prepared us better for an East European explosion.

Yet, once again, these interdependencies are largely hidden from view. And for reasons explained above, the knowledge that preference falsification is pervasive does not suffice to establish that a revolution is imminent. We can sense that multitudes are seething with unarticulated discontent without knowing what it would take to turn the possibility of revolt into reality. In principle, of course, we can develop techniques for uncovering the relevant interdependencies. But for all practical purposes we lack the means to find and process all the requisite information. Also, there are irremovable political obstacles to the correct interpretation of whatever information is produced. In view of all this, it is safe to say that no theorizing could have prepared us adequately for 1989.

I ought to point out that this is not the first time a major uprising has come as a surprise. The French Revolution of 1789, the Russian Revolution of February 1917, and the Iranian Revolution of 1979–80 are among the successful revolutions that stunned their leaders, participants, victims, and observers. The failed ones include the Hungarian uprising of 1956 and the Prague Spring of 1968. In all these cases, preference falsification was a prime factor in the suddenness with which public sentiment shifted—and in the cases of failure, shifted back.

Because preference falsification afflicts politics in every society, though in varying forms and degrees, we are likely to be surprised again and again. But obstacles to predicting particular revolutions do not rule out the production of useful general insights into the *process* of revolution. Even if we cannot predict the time and place of the next big uprising, we can prepare ourselves mentally for the mass mobilization that will bring it about. Equally important, we can understand why it may surprise us. There are many spheres of knowledge where useful general theories foreclose reliable

predictions of specific outcomes. The Darwinian theory of biological evolution illuminates the process whereby species evolve, but without enabling us to specify the future evolution of the swordfish.

The theory of biological evolution and the present argument have a common virtue: each reveals the source of its predictive limitations. In the case at hand, the source is *imperfectly observable nonlinearity*. In ways that we cannot hope to grasp fully, public preferences depend on their determinants nonlinearly. This is why an intrinsically insignificant event may generate a massive rise in public dissent.

The notion that small events may unleash huge forces goes against much of twentieth-century social thought, with its emphasis on linearity and thus continuity and gradualism. So does my suggestion of inescapable unpredictability. Lest this be considered offensive to the scientific spirit, I should note that establishing the limits of knowledge is itself a contribution to the pool of useful knowledge. As Friedrich von Hayek (1974) reminds us, it is also necessary for charting a realistic scientific agenda.

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