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# From “Positive Deviants” to Post-dissident Liberals: A Study of the Transformation of the Concept of “Islands of Positive Deviation”

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## Abstract

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This article attempts to trace the transformation of the formerly sociological concept of “islands of positive deviation” into a component of liberal political language from early 1989 to the early 1990s. During this period, the concept evolved from expert discourse critiquing late socialist society, based on both reformist socialist and anti-modernist arguments, into one of the main concepts in the political language of Slovak post-dissident liberals. This transformation occurred through the redefinition of “islands” from bearers of positive moral characteristics and engines of societal change into more explicitly political challengers to the late communist regime and later to supporters of liberal policies. After identifying themselves as part of one of these islands of positive deviation, future Slovak liberals were able to articulate the language of post-dissidence despite lacking an explicitly dissident past. As argued, this shift is caused by the concept’s authors repositioning from critical sociologists into leaders of the Slovak democratic movement of 1989, and subsequently, founders of Slovak liberal politics in the post-1989 period. Apart from illustrating one aspect of the evolution of modern Slovak political thinking, this case provides a compelling example of the complicated interplay among local, regional, and global contexts in which post-revolutionary politics and their languages constituted themselves.

An interestingly unique characteristic of the Slovak memory of 1989 is the phrase “islands of positive deviation,” a concept mentioned in nearly every account of the events as well as in nearly in any work on the protagonists. The idea is intimately tied to the self-perception of certain intellectuals that became prominent political and ideological actors throughout 1989 and its aftermath, becoming so widespread in certain parts of Slovak society that it migrated from a term referring to historical phenomena to common language, where it is used to describe individuals who act in positive manner within a bad or faulty system. Such widespread usage has led to the fact that despite its prevalence and relative commonplace adoption, the meaning is often ill-defined and broad.

When we look closer at the concept itself and what it exemplifies in the remembrance of 1989, the meaning starts to become clearer. Especially in comparison with other countries in the region, this expression as well as the actors propagating it fit neatly into the category of post-dissident liberals and their corresponding narratives as they

existed in neighbouring countries.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the concept serves as a way in which Slovak liberal intellectuals could speak the language of post-dissidence in a country which is known for its lack of any sort of significant dissident network before 1989. In essence, the phrase can be understood as a specifically Slovak way to refer to the widespread “civil society” theory regarding the fall of state socialism. But to consider it simply a local adaptation of an imported intellectual concept would be a mistake, as the origins stretch back to pre-1989 with originally substantively different meanings. The substantive redefinition of the concept might then show the transformation of Slovak critical reform-oriented sociologists into a group that, through its activity during the Velvet Revolution as well as post-1989, became core leaders of Slovak liberal thinking.

With this in mind, this article aims to analyse the substantial transformation of the term islands of positive deviation. Specifically, it examines the shift from its pre-revolutionary 1989 formulation by a group of sociologists who later played a significant role in the leadership of the Public Against Violence (Verejnosť proti násiliu—VPN) movement and some of the most prominent Slovak liberals. The article attempts to show how these actors redefined the sociological concept in their new roles as openly political actors in a way that allowed them to establish political legitimation for their activities. First, this article provides a closer look at the general conception of civil society and its use in the history of 1989 and critical engagement, its multilayered origin as well as ideological background, before moving to the Slovak case by first examining one of the first significant conceptualizations of the islands of positive deviation before the Velvet Revolution. Subsequently, we will examine the way the notion was redefined throughout political activity in 1989 and the immediate post-revolutionary times when the authors, with some Slovak dissidents, styled themselves as liberals in the political campaign against Vladimír Mečiar.

The full story of how this concept transformed and was redefined from pre-1989 sociological expert discourse into consciously liberal political language allows us to better see the complicated interplay of local, regional and global contexts in which post-revolutionary politics constituted themselves. Furthermore, such perspective allows us to see local intellectuals and political thinkers as agents amongst all these environments negotiating their own positions in intellectual and political spaces that were very different from the ones they had inhabited just few years ago, before the fall of the Iron curtain.

## Paradigms of the study of 1989

Similarly to many other important events in contemporary history, scholarly accounts of the 1989 revolution began to be written as the events unfolded. These reports span a variety of disciplines, from political theory through more

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1 For more about the concept of post-dissident liberalism see: KOPEČEK, Michal. From Narrating Dissidence to Post-Dissident Narratives of Democracy: Anti-totalitarianism, Politics of Memory and Culture Wars in East-Central Europe 1970s–2000s. In BARŠA, Pavel – HESOVÁ Zora – SLAČÁLEK Ondřej (eds.). *Central European Culture Wars: Beyond Post-communism and Populism*. Prague : Humanitas, 2021, pp. 28–84; KOPEČEK, Michal. The Rise and Fall of Czech Post-Dissident Liberalism after 1989. In *East European Politics and Societies*, 2011, vol. 25, no. 2, pp. 244–271, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325410389175>.

empirical political and social sciences to more "proper" historical studies.<sup>2</sup> As a result, coupled with the global impact of the event itself, a great volume of scholarly works devoted to 1989 have appeared. It is possible that this huge amount and breadth of research then led to the development of several divergent conceptual paradigms. Firstly, it is the model and concept of civil society that served a nearly hegemonic role during the 1990s and whose influence stretched beyond the academic world into the realm of politics and public discussion. Because of this, this section is not only a literature review, but also an attempt to provide a general understanding of the term that, in Slovakia, subsumed the concept of "islands of positive deviation." Finally, a quick overview of some of the revisionist approaches is provided, whose critique is useful in the deconstruction of traditional research focused on civil society, mostly centred on the ideological and political baggage of the term and overall historical narrative. This reinforces the argument that the actors' redefinition of their concept in order to align it with the post-dissident understanding of civil society was a political decision, i.e. a choice stemming from their position as actors openly involved in the political race of the 1990s, which began with them assuming leadership of the VPN.

### Civil society and 1989

One of the most prominent and specific attributes of the scholarship on the 1989 revolution is the blurred line between primary and secondary sources. This is a result of the fact that the most prominent and internationally recognized actors involved in the revolutions were intellectuals who recorded reflections on the events as they occurred, as well as newer versions issued based on their personal recollections. As many of these persons were trained social scientists, philosophers or historians, their work sometimes stretched from witness accounts to more scholarly-oriented analyses of the events.<sup>3</sup> More analytical overviews were often used by subsequent generations of scholars as a cornerstone for studies, not merely as primary sources but also as grounds for conceptual and theoretical insights. Consequently, the scholarship on the 1989 transition received a steady influx of ideas and theoretical consideration originating among the Central European dissident intellectual community. The most prominent of these transfers, which later synergized well with Western academia, were the ideas that led to the articulation of the concept of civil society.<sup>4</sup> The events of 1989 refreshed a general interest in civil society views to the degree that this lens became, for a time, nearly hegemonic in the scholarships on democratic transitions in post-Socialist countries.

Before addressing the works of Vladimir Tismaneanu as they served as a representation of the mainstream view of what is defined here as a "civil society

2 Examples include works by Vladimir Tismaneanu, Stephen Kotkin, James Krapfl, or Chris Hann.

3 A good example of this is the early work of Timothy Garton Ash or the memoirs of Fedor Gál. See: ASH, Timothy Garton. *The Magic Lantern: The Revolution of 1989 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin, and Prague*. New York : Random House, 1990; GÁL, Fedor. *Z prvej ruky*. Bratislava : Archa, 1991. The work of Fedor Gál plays a crucial role in the story of "islands of positive deviation," which stems from his dual position as an expert trained in social sciences and political actor.

4 For more general introduction to civil society, this article uses EDWARDS, Michael. Introduction: Civil Society and the Geometry of Human Relations. In EDWARDS, Michael (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Civil Society*. New York : Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 3–14.

thesis," it is useful to consider the concept of civil society itself. Apart from providing the background for some of the criticism levelled against its application in studying 1989, this summary helps to situate the civil society concept, and therefore any thesis built upon it, into the context where it was formulated and where it achieved an earlier, nearly hegemonic status.

Within contemporary scholarship, the use of the concept of civil society exploded after 1989<sup>5</sup> due to by at least two main factors. Firstly, the fall of the Berlin Wall and a concurrent wave of democratization created an environment of optimism and hope for liberal democratic advancement, for which civil society was seen as a necessary component.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, when we delve into the scholarship of 1989 itself, the most prominent dissident intellectuals, whose profile quickly gained global recognition with the fall of state-socialist regimes, and their self-conception regarding the resistance to state power, played a pivotal role in inspiring mostly western-based academics who advocated for the concept of civil society.<sup>7</sup> This drove the formulation of the conception of 1989 that could be termed the civil society thesis, which focused on the role of these intellectuals and emphasized the creation of their "civil society," independent of the authoritarian states in the lead up to the 1989 events.

One scholar who probably did the most to connect civil society intimately with the events of 1989 was Romanian-born Vladimir Tismaneanu, who edited one of the first books that directly established a connection between the changes happening with the fall of state socialism, dissident elites and the concept of civil society. This book titled—quite tellingly—*In Search of Civil Society*, was published in 1990, nearly the same time as the events were happening. In light of the ongoing collapse of the Eastern bloc, his work studies independent peace initiatives that, according to Tismaneanu, "represent a significant fragment of the far-reaching phenomenon described as the rebirth of the civil society in post-totalitarian (post-Stalinist) regimes."<sup>8</sup> In the introduction and a general chapter on individual case studies, Tismaneanu provides a concise summary of his approach, outlined below, that serves here as the definition of the civil society thesis, relying on one of the earliest uses of this approach by one of the most well-known proponents who pushed the idea in subsequent publications.<sup>9</sup>

Two main characteristics of Tismaneanu's conceptualization can be identified in his first book, and also make an appearance in subsequent works and most of the scholarship on the 1989 and Velvet revolution. First is the stark differentiation between society and state. This hard boundary comes from the perspective that the state is always represented by the highest echelons of the national communist party's nomenklatura, while society is represented in the form of the dissident movement leadership. This disparity produces a conceptualization in

5 EDWARDS 2011, p. 4.

6 EDWARDS 2011, p. 5.

7 The work of Stephen Kotkin covered in this article illustrates how this conception was appropriated from the language of the dissidents themselves.

8 TISMANEANU, Vladimir. Preface. In TISMANEANU, Vladimir (ed.) *In Search of Civil Society: Independent Peace Movement in the Soviet Union*. New York; London : Routledge, 1990, pp. vii–x.

9 For example, TISMANEANU, Vladimir – IACOB, Bogdan. *The End and the Beginning: The Revolutions of 1989 and the Resurgence of History*. Budapest : Central European University Press, 2012.

which a good and righteous society opposes the corrupt authoritarian—if not directly totalitarian—state. Rather ironically, one could note that precisely this way of differentiating between state and society helps to create a captivating narrative of the long-term struggle with an authoritarian state that eventually collapses into democratic victory. But beyond this irony, such an approach provides the foundation for a study of the respective countries’ organized dissident movements and their contention with the state power. On the other hand, significant blind spots exist. A view of society bluntly contrasting the state hardly accommodates members of the so-called “grey zone.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, it is a highly top-down approach, focusing only on the small group of high-level state power holders and the groups of organized and networked dissidents, who are often located in capital cities. This way, the concept struggles to capture developments at a peripheral level beyond the capital.

While the delineation between society and state and its association with the upper echelons of power creates empirical challenges to Tismaneanu’s civil society thesis, another important feature is the effect coming from its normative influence. More specifically, it is the way in which Tismaneanu differentiates between the revolutions of 1989 and previous revolutionary changes, chiefly the Russian Bolshevik revolution, a distinction that lies in the fact that, according to Tismaneanu, while previous revolutionary movements were driven by the pursuit of an ideologically determined utopia, the revolutions of 1989 were devoid of ideology—sometimes even referred to as anti-ideological—solely focusing on human rights and democracy.<sup>11</sup> This framing is reportedly taken from the—at the time of publishing, nearly contemporary—writings of the dissidents themselves.<sup>12</sup> Such a definition of revolutions as non-ideological can be useful in the study of organized dissident movements after the rise of the human rights discourse in the wake of the Helsinki Agreements. For example, it can show how dissidents from various ideological positions converged on the base minimalist, and to a high degree, liberal unity plan, but it also causes major issues and reveals gaps in the scholarship if embraced wholeheartedly. If accepted, the non-utopian, non-ideological nature of the revolution has strong, liberally infused, teleological assumptions. This definition implies that the only natural route for the post-revolutionary movement was the path to a Western-style pluralistic liberal democratic state. Instead of looking at the period after 1989 as a highly contentious time of state and system formation, in which it would be possible to critically assess various ideological and discourse currents within the period, everything outside of the market liberal democratic path is presented as an aberration deprived of context.<sup>13</sup>

Apart from such blind spots that this conception generates in the possibilities of empirical research, these notions can be effectively criticized by a clos-

10 The question of the “gray zone” in-between nomenklatura and dissidence was part of scholarship for a long time, although it has come into focus only recently. The term comes from ŠIKLOVÁ, Jiřina. The “Gray Zone” and the Future of Dissent in Czechoslovakia. In *Social Research*, 1990, vol. 57, no. 2, pp. 347–363.

11 TISMANEANU 1990, p. ix.

12 TISMANEANU 1990, p. ix.

13 The differentiation between “natural” and “aberrant” paths may have been one of the influences behind Madeleine Albright’s characterization of Slovakia as the “black hole of Central Europe,” a label attributed to the policies of Vladimír Mečiar.

er look at its intellectual history, as this shows the huge influence of Western academia on its development, giving the whole civil society thesis a very distinct Western-centric focus that often dropped the previously existing dissident criticism of Western-style liberal-democratic societies. Firstly, the term civil society itself was not as prevalent among the people who would be identified as its inspiration. Even in the 1988 inquiry conducted among the dissident intellectuals regarding the state of "independent society" in Czechoslovakia, only one of the respondents, Jiří Dienstbier, employed the term civil society.<sup>14</sup> What is more interesting, his definition of civil society explicitly includes the state in it, in stark contrast to the Tismaneanu definition above that was conceived after its author's exile to halls of Western academia.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, it is important to note that these Western-based conceptions of civil society that were ostensibly inspired by works such as Václav Havel's *Power of the Powerless* do not include Havel's critique of the modern consumerist society that he identifies in both the East and the West.<sup>16</sup> Lastly, when comes to the topic of Havel and his influence on civil society, despite often being cited as one of the major inspirations for its renewal, he mostly engaged with the term only after 1989 in public disputes with Václav Klaus, and tried to use it as a way to transform his previous highly limited dissident thinking into views that would accommodate the majority of society.<sup>17</sup> These points then illustrate that the use of the civil society concept was not as prevalent among dissidents as might be seen based on Western-centric scholarship as well as the fact that when it was used, it could bear very distinctive meanings. Therefore, the concept that evolved afterwards provides a very specific and limited Western-centric definition of civil society.

Despite the above-mentioned Western-centric and liberal bias, these two key characteristics remain constant in later works of Tismaneanu, apart from some minor accommodations of the revisionist work of scholars such as Stephen Kotkin.<sup>18</sup> Tismaneanu's conceptualization approach to 1989 has, despite its undisputed productivity in the studies of dissident movements, particular shortcomings that flatten the events. First, there is the contentious and disputed nature of the term civil society that contributes to disciplinary confusion fostered by completely different understandings of the term in various scholarships. Furthermore, when contextualized in the contemporary political and public discussion, civil society holds a strong ideological bias. Second, Tismaneanu's assumptions obstruct empirical research mapping the revolutions of 1989 from more ambiguous and peripheral positions beyond capitals and stark contrasts between the regime and the dissidents. Finally, this approach

14 BENDA, Václav et al. Parallel Polis, or An Independent Society in Central and Eastern Europe: An Inquiry. In *Social Research*, 1988, vol. 55, no. 1–2, pp. 237–243.

15 What is even more interesting, he explicitly mentions this inclusion of the state as an important difference between civil society and independent society/parallel polis used by other respondents.

16 This criticism can be seen in probably his most famous essay, *Power of the Powerless*. See: HAVEL, Václav. *Moc Bezmocných*. Londýn : Londýnské listy, 1979.

17 See for example ZNOJ, Milan. Václav Havel, His Idea of Civil Society, and the Czech Liberal Tradition. In KOPEČEK, Michal – WCISLIK, Piotr (eds.). *Thinking through Transition*. Budapest : Central European University Press, 2015, pp. 109–139.

18 Such acceptance can be observed in the introduction of TISMANEANU – IACOB 2012, where Kotkin's work is addressed.

bears a strong teleological connotation that does not allow contextualizing the post-1989 discussions in their context since everything outside of the purview of liberal democracy is classified as an aberration.

### Uncivil society and other revisions

Although Tismaneanu's works did provide a blueprint for most of the studies written in the early aftermath of 1989, it is not the only conception that developed in the field. Some direct challenges were articulated in near lockstep with formation of the "civil society thesis,"<sup>19</sup> however, a greater boom in revisionist approaches started later. This surge was associated with empirical observations of unfulfilled civil society thesis assumptions and predictions in many countries, combined with the shattering of the global liberal consensus after the 2008 financial crisis.<sup>20</sup> As a result, most of these works are highly critical of the liberal bias inherent in the concept of civil society.

Apart from challenging civil society as an explanatory framework, these revisionist approaches differed from Tismaneanu's framework in their heterogeneity. In other words, while certain points of criticism are common among them, it is hard to summarize through only one particular work. In an attempt to provide an overview, this paper will focus on three of the more well-known examples: studies by British anthropologist Chris Hann, most prominently his essay *Civil Society at the Grassroots: A Reactionary View*,<sup>21</sup> Stephen Kotkin's book *Uncivil Society*,<sup>22</sup> and finally the work *1989: A Global History of Eastern Europe*<sup>23</sup> by James Mark, Bogdan C. Iacob, Tobias Ruprecht, and Ljubica Spaskovska.

Economic anthropologist Chris Hann started his exploration of the Eastern European transition roughly at the same time as Tismaneanu. In contrast to the study of various independent peace initiatives and dissident movements, Hann's work is an outgrowth of his pre-1989 research of the Hungarian rural community of Taszlár. Since the early 1990s, Hann has tried to engage critically with the concept of civil society and its connection to the post-socialist transition.<sup>24</sup> One of the most prominent points of his critique is an argument based on Karl Polányi's work on embedded economies. In Hann's conceptualization, the late Kádárist regime allowed for a slow embourgeoisement of the rural communities through specialist cooperatives, embedding the economy into society.<sup>25</sup> This state of economic relations with society was then broken by

19 Works by Chris Hann can serve as an example of these early challenges.

20 A good example is the rise of national conservative populism in countries within the region. Most prominent are Hungary and Poland, as well as other phenomena that seemingly differentiate post-socialist and post-soviet countries from the "old" western democracies. TISMANEANU – IACOB 2012.

21 HANN, Chris. *Civil Society at the Grassroots: A Reactionary View*. In HANN, Chris. *Repatriating Polanyi: Market Society in the Visegrád States*. Budapest; New York : CEU Press, 2019, pp. 167–185.

22 With an unspecified contribution from Jan T. Gross. KOTKIN, Stephen – GROSS, Jan T. *Uncivil Society: 1989 and the Implosion of the Communist Establishment*. New York : Modern Library, 2009.

23 MARK, James et al. *1989: A Global History of Eastern Europe*. Cambridge, UK : Cambridge University Press, 2019.

24 For example, HANN, Chris – DUNN, Elizabeth (eds.) *Civil Society: Challenging the Western Models*. London; New York : Routledge, 1996.

25 HANN 2019.

the introduction of free market reforms in the aftermath of the 1989 revolutions. As a result, the rural population experienced an economic downturn and depredation of the free market.

Hann's divergence from Tismaneanu's civil society perspective becomes apparent when he focuses on the economic aspects of the small rural population in contrast to the more urban and elite-minded Tismaneanu. However, Hann also directly criticizes the concept of civil society.<sup>26</sup> In his paper, he uses the example of Taszlár and its neighbouring towns to show how not only the fall of the communist regime did not lead to a flourishing civil society within these communities, but it even weakened civic engagement to a certain degree and caused economic hardship. In this text, Hann provides convincing criticism of the normative assumptions that underline the conceptualization of "civil society." At the same time, his approach has its flaws. Firstly, it focuses almost exclusively on the rural population and does not consider the lived experience of the urban population. It also disregards criticism coming from local intellectuals regarding the economic crisis, the lack of political freedom and the moral challenges of aiming his argument at criticism of the West-based neoliberal capitalist system.

To move from an anthropological critique to a historically minded one, it is necessary to consider Stephen Kotkin's *Uncivil Society*.<sup>27</sup> As the title indicates, the book was written as a direct challenge to the previous historical conceptualization of the fall of state socialism. Kotkin shows that civil society is not an apolitical explanatory concept but instead, it comes from the dictionary of the Polish opposition movement as a self-description.<sup>28</sup> He points out that civil society was not the cause of the changes within East European states but an effect of it, since they, apart from Poland, lacked any organized mass opposition movement that could be classified as "civil society" independent of the state. Furthermore, he reinforces this argument by pointing out an apparent lack of mass protests and mobilization in Poland, in contrast to the situation in Romania and Eastern Germany.

As a result, Kotkin proposes a different explanatory framework focusing on the role of communist elites and economic crisis. He argues that the Nomenklatura communist party, in contrast to small groups of dissidents, constituted society and that this "uncivil society" slowly lost its conviction in the state socialist system. One of the most important reasons was a deepening economic crisis that led socialist states to borrow a great deal of capital from Western banks to finance an increase in possible consumption for their citizens. Over the years, this model of raising the quality of life became more and more unsustainable; therefore, faith among members of Nomenklatura decreased further. In Kotkin's narrative, the last nail in the coffin of the state-socialist system was Gorbachev's decision not to intervene and prop up the Eastern European communist regimes. As a result, elites of various nations decided that it would be more beneficial to them to cave into public pressure and transform themselves from holders of political power into holders of economic power.

26 HANN 2019, p. 168.

27 KOTKIN – GROSS 2009.

28 KOTKIN – GROSS 2009, p. xiv.



The title of the work of James Mark and his co-authors Bogdan C. Iacob, Tobias Rupprecht, and Ljubica Spaskovska,<sup>29</sup> works similarly to the title of Kotkin's book. Beyond explicitly outlining their main focuses in the titles, these authors use their work as a platform to critique previous scholarship on 1989. While Kotkin shifts his focus from the civil society of dissidents to the uncivil society of communist elites, Mark and his colleagues move beyond a purely regional perspective on Eastern Europe and the Socialist bloc, adopting a more global approach. They direct their focus toward the global aspects of the changes that took place during 1989, pointing out how the fall of the state socialist block had an effect outside of the region, and outside of Europe as well. Furthermore, they emphasize that, despite the prevailing opinion, former state-socialist countries could hardly be considered isolated from the rest of the world.<sup>30</sup> Instead, the authors describe a long-term project of what could be termed an alternative path of globalization that was not centred around Western capitalist states, but built upon a shared anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist rhetoric between the Soviet bloc and post-colonial states. On the surface, these statements appear not as a direct criticism of the civil society thesis, but rather a new, unresearched angle on the events. Nevertheless, this criticism lies within their reliance on Kotkin's work.<sup>31</sup> They use him to point out the importance of the various reform communists within the power structure and reject any decisive role of the dissident movement and mass mobilization in the changes that happened. They argue that the post-socialist transition cannot be classified as revolutionary and define it instead as an elite-guided transition during which Eastern European elites decided to move from the alternative project of globalization in favour of joining Western-style capitalist globalization in certain peripheral positions, while embracing the Western liberal discourse of civil society.

As can be seen from the overview, both Kotkin and the authors of *1989* reject Tismaneanu's focus on dissidents, and criticize the liberal triumphalism inherent to the conceptualization of civil society. In doing so, they provide a poignant critique and question the prevailing narratives bringing up an important dimension of the events that was previously not studied. Although these approaches can be effectively criticized—for example, they might have a problem accommodating the radically democratic aspects of the Czechoslovak Velvet Revolutions as described by Krapfl and Maďarová<sup>32</sup>—they provide effective criticism of the "civil society" narrative. With Hann, they are able to show how this narrative originates from the dissident and post-dissident language of self-legitimization, of both themselves as new political elite as well as their chosen path of liberal societal and economic transformation tied to the prevalent Western model. This shows us how thin the line is between academic terms that aim to

29 MARK 2019.

30 MARK 2019, p. 8.

31 Cf. and explicit reference to Kotkin's work in the *Introduction*, MARK 2019, pp. 2–3. There, Mark and his colleagues also stress out the importance of reform communist elites as contrasted to previous "liberal narrative."

32 KRAPFL, James. *Revolution with a Human Face: Politics, Culture, and Community in Czechoslovakia, 1989–1992*. Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 2013; MAĎAROVÁ, Zuzana. *Ako odvrávat' Novembri 1989*. Bratislava : Aspekt, 2019.

describe society and more politically active terms that seek to provide legitimacy within the political sphere. It also provides a certain blueprint to explain how the term islands of positive deviation transformed in a very similar manner.

### Islands of positive deviation

As described in the introduction, when comes to post-dissident liberal language in Slovakia, the term civil society often has been replaced by the phrase islands of positive deviation—an expression held over from Slovak sociology of the late 1980s. This subsection investigates the concept as it was introduced in two articles published in 1989 by Vladimír Krivý and Soňa Szomolányi in the Slovak sociology journal *Sociológia*.<sup>33</sup> The two pieces offer a contemporary conceptualization of the societal crisis, openly supporting perestroika-style reforms in Czechoslovakia, written not by dissidents but by experts working in some capacity for the state. Both articles were included in the discussion section of the *Sociológia* issue; therefore, it is important to understand them in conversation with each other. While Krivý focuses more generally on systemic and social change, Szomolányi’s article concentrates on a systematic account of what islands of positive deviation actually are.

The third text covered here is included to show the important link between the form the concept took prior to November 1989 and post-1989. More specifically, the difference between its “Perestroika” incarnation and its shape as a liberal post-dissident concept erases the gap between “positive deviation” and “civil society.” The work was authored by the Slovak dissident Miroslav Kusý, who in his commentary for Radio Free Europe directly links Czechoslovak dissidents with Szomolányi’s understanding of islands of positive deviation.<sup>34</sup>

### Krivý and the effect of cooking of the frog

The title of Krivý’s article can be loosely translated as *The Frog and the Cow Effects in the Entanglements of Societal Dynamics*,<sup>35</sup> which hints at two main metaphors in the text and the primary stated focus—the relationship between people and the society in which they live. The first metaphor is that of “cooking the frog,” which is used to illustrate the ability of a system to gradually change, something considered to occur normally without the people living in the system noticing. The imagery reinforces Krivý’s diagnosis of the crisis of the late-socialist system. The second animal employed, and therefore the second comparison, is the so-called “effect of the confused cow.” This refers to a cow’s reaction when it is released into its natural environment of the open meadow after having been raised in the technologically infused environment of contemporary agricultural production. Krivý uses this comparison to illustrate the future problems with social and systematic change.

33 KRIVÝ, Vladimír. Efekty žaby a kravy v zauzleniach spoločenskej dynamiky. In *Sociológia*, 1989, vol. 21, no. 3, pp. 343–349; SZOMOLÁNYI, Soňa. „Malé veličiny“ a ich význam pre sociálnu dynamiku. In *Sociológia*, 1989, vol. 21, no. 3, pp. 349–358.

34 KUSÝ, Miroslav. Chvála disentu. In KUSÝ, Miroslav. Na vlnách Slobodnej Európy. Bratislava : Smena, 1990, pp. 83–86.

35 KRIVÝ 1989.

As these metaphors indicate, Krivý's article is not merely an expert description of the present, system but an account of the pending societal crisis and possible ways to face it. He asserts that all systems instil certain kinds of values in their inhabitants that are subsequently internalized and reinforced. This is what led to the problems with the existing late-state-socialist system, which he calls a "centralist administrative-bureaucratic system" that has "roots in Stalinism and neo-Stalinism."<sup>36</sup> According to the author, the nature of this system causes a drive to eliminate self-regulating mechanisms within society. It is perceived as successful only as long as it increases its reach in eliminating these self-regulations and at the same time, controls any possible critique. Once the system is no longer able to perform these functions, the need for change appears, which simultaneously clashes with the system's centralized drive, limiting the potential for any alternatives.

As Krivý explains further, the forces clash in the faulty system and slowly start to impact the people living within it by changing their "practical normality," i.e. what they perceive as standard instead of what could be normatively understood as normal. This is the above-mentioned effect of cooking of the frog and leads to a "silent catastrophe" for both the economy and the natural environment. Furthermore, what Krivý terms as "tiny pathologies" becomes more prominent within society and accepted as normal. These include a low tolerance for non-standard behaviour, the endangerment of the dignity of people themselves and those around them, moral numbness and increased aggression.

After such a description of the crisis within society in Czechoslovakia, Krivý moves toward the issue of societal change, leaping from the frog to the cow metaphor and identifying that every social change goes through three different stages. First, the need for the change is rejected. After rejection, change is introduced from above due to growing issues. This is the stage, according to Krivý, Perestroika occupied during the time of his writing. Finally, there is acceptance. It is exactly between introduction and acceptance where Krivý sees the biggest obstacle to necessary change, as any transformation is useless if it is not accepted by the majority. Such acceptance is typically met with resistance, however, by the contemporary rules of society that stifle the "human potential of action." It is not enough to remove external obstacles. To achieve change, one needs to challenge internalized obstacles in order to revive a person's capacities to take risks, create, be honourable and empathize with suffering. This constitutes the potential for problems occurring during the transition period which causes the abovementioned "confused cow effect" as people must adapt from being technocratically directed to a new way of life under a new system.

It is in this part of the article that Krivý begins to use the term "islands of positive deviation."<sup>37</sup> People who can be defined as part of these "islands" are deemed crucial in the success of societal change as they can guide those around

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36 KRIVÝ 1989, p. 344.

37 It is important to note that Krivý always uses the term in quotation marks implying it is a metaphor, while Szomolányi discards the punctuation, implying that she understands the phrase as a much more stable and existing social fact instead of a metaphor. This difference is maintained here, using quotation marks when discussing Krivý and discarding them when talking about Szomolányi's conception.

them to overcome the transitional period and push through anomy, rebuild the societal consensus and "emancipate civil society." This is not done through directive and a frontal change of society, but through the enlargement of these small milieus. According to Krivý, "islands" spontaneously form in the face of current societal norms thanks to a conducive local environment. People defined as part of these "islands" show higher and more universal value systems and are closer to "normative normality" than people living in anomic "practical normality." This allows them to provide an alternative model of behaviour and normality within the system, aiding the change.

### Szomolányi and small quantities

While Krivý's text is much more centred on a generalized account of the societal crisis and possible issues with societal change, Szomolányi's article<sup>38</sup> offers a systematic treatment of the islands of positive deviation and ways in which individuals can bring about societal change. She shows how small quantities function as the engine of societal change and in the case of islands of positive deviation, of positive desirable ones. She opens with a short account of previous sociological studies, arguing that until the moment of writing, a systematic approach to the study of society dominated and as such, most studies focused on the interaction of classes within the larger system.

According to Szomolányi, the situation changes with the elaboration of a new paradigm she calls the "humanist-ecological paradigm," which includes herself and Krivý, as well as a group of others.<sup>39</sup> The sociologists working in this paradigm criticize the technocratic management of society, the extensive quantitative focus, "megalomania" and the conceptualization of humans as a "human factor" of economic development. In contrast, they argue that economic aims should be subservient to societal ones, with a focal shift from the extensive growth of living standards to quality of life, which would balance the social development of humanity without damaging either the environment or the human population. Furthermore, the group of scholars demands greater diversification of society and seeks to undermine the drive to homogenize it. The problems they pinpoint stifle the growth of society and cause the privatization of personal life, social apathy, "mediocrity syndrome," as well as fear of the new and cynicism.

Szomolányi argues that as all these problems are structural and as structures are inherently stable, there is a need to focus on individuals. To make this point, she provides a quote from the "classics of Marxism" saying that not only circumstances create humans but also humans create circumstances. She then further argues for the necessity of focusing on individuals with the historical argument that every time<sup>40</sup> masses were exalted as true subjects of history, they were treated as controlled objects. This kind of rhetoric never mobilized the masses, but instead caused widespread fatalism and pushed people from the

38 SZOMOLÁNYI 1989.

39 Interestingly, similarly to Szomolányi, many of the mentioned sociologists became an integral part of the Public Against Violence movement in 1989.

40 According to her account, most prominently under Stalin.

public sphere into the purely private sphere where they lost personal responsibility and their dignity.

Like the piece by Krivý, after a diagnosis of crisis, Szomolányi investigates the mechanism of social change, which she sees as latent within society, with the main aim of altering the existing practical normality. To describe this mechanism, she introduces the term "small quantities;" groups and individuals who, like Krivý's "islands of positive deviation," have different values and systems than the rest of the society. During the moment of societal transformation, these groups can infuse wider society with their values and thus shape future practical normality. This is done by pulling people around them into their value systems. As an example, she cites the popular response to Perestroika, which started from above but was met by the quick creation of various small groups that supported it from below. For Szomolányi, islands of positive deviancy are just a sub-set of small quantities. Namely, they show more progressive social values than the ones present in the practical normality of society.

These positive deviants can then be either carriers of already pre-existing norms and values (Szomolányi uses an example of academics who follow scholarly ethics), or they can be creators of their own set of new norms and values. What is important is that these groups and individuals do not need to have a strong direct influence on society; it is enough that their existence serves as a positive example of different norms and values. Another crucial factor is that one cannot be forced into this position as, according to the scholar, the heroism of such existence cannot be demanded, even if it is necessary during periods of radical change.

In her conclusion, Szomolányi reiterates that not everyone who counts as a small quantity is necessarily a part of the islands of positive deviation as they can also be an epitome of more problematic societal norms, showing that in this account of social change, there is the possibility for a much more ambiguous kind of change. Furthermore, she argues that while a society without positive deviation is stable, it cannot adapt to new challenges in danger of decline. This is because positive deviants serve, similarly to Krivý's conceptualisation, as "accelerators of social dynamics."

### **Dissidents and "islands of positive deviation"**

As detailed above, the concept of positive deviation maintains similarities to the late-socialist dissident discourse. Most prominently, in the fact that, according to both discourses, there is the possibility to attain societal change by following one's own set of convictions and social values, counter to what is prevalent. What makes this discourse specific is its origin in officially sanctioned sociological academia combined with an overall focus on the societal change during Perestroika.

The process of subsuming "islands of positive deviation" under the dissident or post-dissident narrative started very early. As other researchers point

out, it happened in 1989 in the Miroslav Kusý’s article for Radio Free Europe,<sup>41</sup> where he defends Czechoslovak dissidents against various allegations coming from the official channels to undermine dissident integrity.<sup>42</sup> Kusý, a dissident himself, also continues his previous criticism of the Czechoslovak government for the superficial adoption of the Perestroika policy, comparing the examples of Andrei Sakharov and Václav Havel; while Sakharov is respected in the Soviet Union, Havel sits in prison in Czechoslovakia.

Apart from this focus on Perestroika, Kusý also quotes the article written by Szomolányi for the *Literárny týždenník* journal.<sup>43</sup> This piece is a shortened and simplified form of the sociological article that was published not in an academic journal but in a periodical for a wider educated audience. In his comparison, Kusý points out the “living in the truth” aspect of both Havel’s dissident discourse and the discussion surrounding islands of positive deviation. He then rhetorically asks who in Czechoslovakia are positive deviants if not the dissidents themselves, and why they are treated differently from Soviet dissidents when both governments are meant to follow the same programme of Perestroika. What is lacking in Kusý’s account is the aspect of radical change or crisis necessary for societal change, or any more systematic treatment of societal illness present in those more academic texts.

### From “islands of positive deviation” to “islands of civic resistance”

Szomolányi and several of her colleagues, such as Martin Bútora and Fedor Gál, from the humanist-ecological paradigm met with Miroslav Kusý and other dissidents during the formation of Public Against Violence,<sup>44</sup> the Slovak counterpart to the Civic Forum. Though not without contestation, the Bratislava movement established itself as a leader of the revolution in the Slovak part of Czechoslovakia.<sup>45</sup> Both dissidents and “sociologists” were elected to the movement’s Central Coordination Committee with Fedor Gál becoming chairman of the committee. At this point, the Slovak post-dissident movement started to take shape. During the following political campaign, these two groups united first against the communist regime, and then against a faction headed by Vladimír Mečiar, the future “father of Slovak statehood.” In this position, they generally tried to stay coordinated with Prague in defending the idea of a common Czechoslovak state, the creation of the liberal institutions and the implementation of a quick market transformation as propagated by Václav Klaus.

It was during this fragmentation of the VPN that this group started to look for their political and ideological identity. As has been shown by previous

41 ČÍŽOVÁ, Júlia – ĎURČO, Michal. Positive Deviance in 1980s Czechoslovakia: The Case of the Bratislava Environmental Movement. In *Historický časopis*, 2022, vol. 70, no. 3, pp. 461–486.

42 KUSÝ 1990.

43 SZOMOLÁNYI, Soňa. Je sociálna zmena mimo nás? In *Literárny týždenník*, 1989, vol. 2, no. 11, p. 10.

44 For more details about the creation of the Bratislava Public Against Violence and the membership of its Central Coordination Committee, see GÁL 1991, pp. 11–23.

45 For examples of contestation, see: KRAPFL 2013, pp. 148–196

researchers,<sup>46</sup> the group consciously defined themselves as a liberal democratic or liberal-conservative movement. A conference held in April 1990 termed Ethics and Politics—Art Against Totalitarianism, played a big role in this. The conference included papers from within the intellectual milieu of the VPN as well as several important guests from abroad, such as Adam Michnik, Jacques Rupnik and Pavel Tigrid. Papers at the conference articulated positions and terms that were infused by both Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history” thesis as well as Michnik’s conceptualization of totalitarianism.<sup>47</sup> In essence, it can be argued that during this important event for the articulation of Slovak liberal thought, future Slovak liberals came into direct contact with both the Western tradition of liberalism as well as a variety of dissident thinking from the region. The origin of Slovak liberalism is inherently tied both to a conscious self-description and the transnational influence coming from both the West and from the surrounding region.

When comes to the concept of islands of positive deviation, the original conceptualization would not work well with this new liberal outlook as it embodied both reform communist and anti-modernist elements that could be used as a critique of not only state-socialism, but also of liberal democratic order—the liberal democratic order that members of the humanist-ecological paradigm aimed to build with the dissidents through their political activity and articulation of their post-dissident discourse. Because of that, it is possible to see a certain reflexive and unconscious reformulation of the concept in order to both provide legitimacy to their new political platform as well as more effectively unite both the “sociological” and “dissident” wings of the forming liberals.

More specifically, they started to recast the “islands of positive deviation” as well as themselves as much more directly opposing the regime, as the concept had appeared before the revolution. A good example of this is a text written by Fedor Gál. In his 1991 book, *Z prvej ruky [From First Hand]*,<sup>48</sup> he describes the period between the 1989 revolution and 1991, and the coming fragmentation of the VPN. According to the author, this book was written as the events were unfolding; he spent mornings chronicling details and an analysis, and the rest of the day in his position with the VPN coordinating committee. In this aspect, his book belongs to the first generation of literature written in 1989 that blends both memoirs and more social scientific analyses from actors directly involved in the events.

In the introduction, Gál talks about “islands of civic resistance,” a move which shifts the islands of positive deviation metaphor from sociological use into outwardly political context. He does this by creating a geographical metaphor that much more directly includes political contestation than “islands of positive deviation.” This is not the only use of the “island’s” metaphors in

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46 IVANČÍK, Matej. From Democrats to Liberals / The Ambiguous Origins of Liberals and Civil Society in Slovakia after 1989. In *Soudobé dějiny / Czech Journal of Contemporary History*, 2021, vol. 28, no. 3, pp. 706–724, DOI: 10.51134/sod.2021.052.

47 IVANČÍK 2021, pp. 716–722.

48 GÁL 1991.

his introduction. More specifically, he very explicitly uses “islands of positive deviation,” though, it differs significantly from the original conceptualization. Namely, he identifies these islands as a source of organizing the revolutionary movement in the aftermath of 17 November 1989, recasting these islands as a kind of truth speaker. According to him, they “took it upon themselves to publicly name reasons for and consequences of societal schizophrenia, the difference between how the state of our life characterize power [...] and how it was felt by the majority.”<sup>49</sup> As can be seen in this definition, “islands of positive deviation” no longer represented an important moral critique of society and important accelerators of the societal change that can be used by reforms introduced from above. Instead, they became something much closer to dissidents, to those who choose to live “in the truth” as Havel would call it. In this sense, the challenge they provided to society was no longer societal or moral, but much more overtly political. They were connected with islands of “civic resistance” against the government and represented the silent majority of society against both party and the state, creating quite a strict distinction between society and state akin to the later conceptualization of civil society.

This account bears much more in common with dissident and post-dissident liberal narratives than with any previous pre-1989 sociological conceptualization. Gál openly links the concept with a package of policy prescriptions that are liberal but in essence do not massively differ from the democracy-oriented demands of the VPN movement upon its formation. In a way, Gál’s conceptualization can be understood as the beginning of the transition of the concept into a fully articulated part of the Slovak liberal discourse.<sup>50</sup> The end of this transition can be found in the works of Krivý and Szomolányi once again, this time in studies from a 1993 report issued by the Sociology department of Slovak Academy of Sciences *Slovensko: Kroky k Európskemu Spoločenstvu* [Slovakia: Steps towards the European Community].<sup>51</sup> Written in the aftermath of both the dissolution of Czechoslovakia as well as the final fragmentation of the VPN and the rise of Mečiar’s Movement for Democratic Slovakia to power, this text comes from a period when Slovak liberal thinking was much more articulated and—in a way—stabilized than in 1991, when Gál published his book.

The concept of “islands of positive deviation” does not play a central role in either Krivý’s or Szomolányi’s text. Their chapters are devoted to the *Sociocultural Background of the Transformation Processes* and the *Formation of Political Elite* respectively. Despite this difference, they both mention the con-

49 GÁL 1991, p. 16.

50 Although Fedor Gál takes a more complicated position towards liberalism, he makes the final step of recasting all the islands of positive deviation as sort of dissents in the making. Afterwards, Slovak liberals such as Szomolányi cite this book in order to prove that islands of positive deviation functioned as challengers and opponents of the state-socialist regime in Slovakia, thus integrating this book in their narratives.

51 KRIVÝ, Vladimír. Sociokultúrne pozadie transformačných procesov na Slovensku. In FALŤAN, Eubomír – SZOMOLÁNYI, Soňa (eds.) *Slovensko: kroky k európskemu spoločenstvu*. Bratislava : Sociologický ústav SAV, 1993, pp. 5–13; SZOMOLÁNYI, Soňa. Formovanie Politických Elít. In FALŤAN – SZOMOLÁNYI 1993, pp. 53–69.



cept, albeit with different meanings, but both align themselves with different parts of conscious post-dissident liberal thinking. Firstly, Krivý focuses on economic prescriptions for Slovakia and uses the concept<sup>52</sup> only briefly to talk about the sections of Slovak society that are supportive of radical market transformation.<sup>53</sup> This shows that at this point, the concept transformed from the conception of the groups sharing various altruistic values into a metaphor that is utilized to exemplify groups holding minority liberal political prescriptions regarding economic transformation. Similarly, to Krivý, Szomolányi's engagement with the concept is quite brief. Namely, she fully identifies "islands of positive deviation" with opposition to the communist regime,<sup>54</sup> an opposition that according to her, was weak and fragmented but it was still opposition, similar to Charter 77 in the Czech part of Czechoslovakia. In this way, she creates political legitimacy for her concept as well as for the people described by it, herself in 1989 included, coming from a dissident experience to support her liberal-institutionalist prescriptions found in the rest of the text where the main point of criticism is "nationally-social" reform communist elites around Mečiar and their authoritarian political behaviour standing in way of the continuation of liberal transformation.

## Conclusion

As this article attempts to demonstrate, the concept of "islands of positive deviation" underwent a significant and rapid transformation from its conceptualization before November 1989 until 1993. Namely, the notion travelled from the sociological discourse that combined both elements of reform socialism as well as anti-modernism to describe the societal crisis and argue for the implementation of Perestroika from above, into one of the core concepts of political language belonging to Slovak post-dissident liberalism. This transformation comes from the fact that the authors became prominent founders and leaders of the revolutionary VPN, a movement that consciously transformed itself from broadly democratic into a self-described liberal or liberal-conservative organization. This created an ideological prescription as well as a political position that actors held even after their movement out of active political life and back to the position of experts. Such a perspective then caused a reframing of their pre-1989 intellectual stances to allow them to speak from post-dissident positions and through it, create discourse that would legitimize their consciously liberal politics, walking a comparable path as protagonists of civil society discourse in the international environment as well as in other countries in the region.

The goal of this article is to offer deeper insights into the formation of the post-1989 political and ideological landscape in independent Slovak politics and to illustrate some of the complex factors that shaped it. Furthermore, as

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52 Furthermore, here he changes it to the term "islands," contrasting it with the prevailing notion of the majority as the sea. This way, he employs an implicit rhetorical reference to previous discourse while completely transforming its meaning.

53 KRIVÝ 1993, p. 15.

54 SZOMOLÁNYI 1993, p. 86.

this transformation of the concept took place not only under internal political calculation, but also in the context of regional and global intellectual discussion, the current paper can show the interplay of all pertinent influences that shaped political thinking in the early post-socialist period.