

## Chapter 2

# The Building of Democracy

### ABSTRACT

*This chapter looks at the events leading up to the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia and Hungary in 1989. It addresses the overall climate that allowed communism to fall, along with specific events that took place in each country. The aftermath of the regime change is discussed as well as people's reactions to it. The chapter also looks at how democratic structures were built in each country. Finally, European Union membership is briefly discussed including how Czechs and Hungarians feel about the EU today.*

### INTRODUCTION

The Czech Republic and Hungary both had fairly peaceful transitions to democracy. In Czechoslovakia, it went so well it was called the Velvet Revolution. The transition began on November 17, 1989, when students held a protest in Prague, and by December 29, 1989, a new democratic government was in place. In Hungary, it was more of an evolution towards democracy as opposed to one single event that triggered the change. This chapter will examine the circumstances that led to the fall of communism, how people felt about the change, and how democracy was built in each country.

This chapter will also look at the important role several key democratic principles played in the transition. Freedom of speech, expression, and assembly were key tools used in Czechoslovakia and Hungary. As will be discussed, the circumstances for change were present, but the fall of communism may not have happened as quickly in these countries without a push by the public

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and key leaders. Even without having been politically socialized towards democracy, examples in this chapter are evidence that there was already an awareness of the importance of key democratic values such as freedom of speech.

## **THE FALL OF COMMUNISM**

In Hungary, there was not one incident that can be pinpointed as when communism fell, but instead, it was a series of events. A Hungarian professor who was 18 years old when communism fell said that the change started at the beginning of the 1980s. He said that the government started loosening up, which allowed for more capitalist behavior starting in 1982. There were several economic indicators in the 1980s, which showed a move towards capitalism. For example, the first McDonald's in Hungary opened in Budapest on April 29, 1988—more than a year before communism officially fell. By 1987, people had the political freedom necessary for capitalism.

Others agreed that the change really started sometime in the late 1970s or early 1980s. A Hungarian woman said by the 1980s, there were certain boundaries that could be crossed. For example, a Hungarian man said that by the late 1970s or early 1980s, it was legal to open tiny shops to sell items such as clothes and records. Western records were available, and it was possible to watch Western movies such as Star Wars. Another man pinpointed 1986–1987 as when the economy first started opening up. He said things changed quickly after that.

A Hungarian woman said that in the 1980s behind the scenes, it had already been decided that the regime would change. She worked at a university and said in 1988, American students came to Budapest from California in the middle of setting up Central European University. She said liberal intellectuals and Western companies had a big role in the change, and by the 1980s, the Communist Party was a joke.

Non-economic changes also started happening. As will be discussed more in Chapter 3, under communism, students were supposed to belong to Pioneers and then join the Communist Youth Organization. The pioneer movement was started in Russia in the 1920s as a communist alternative to scouting. Once a person aged out of Pioneers, he or she then joined the Communist Youth Organization, which served as a segue into possible Communist Party membership. Before 1980, it was obligatory to join both the pioneers and Communist Youth Organization. Those who did not were typically punished,

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