The broad context of political change in post-communist countries was unique. In Western Europe, the process of democratisation was lengthy, organic, and largely evolutionary. It was effectively a process of gradual extension of the franchise and the opening up of the system to new election contenders. Underlying economic and social changes, arising from the spread of industrialisation and urbanisation, were undoubtedly both cause and consequence of this political process. But there was no notion of an advance blueprint guiding the direction of change and there was no single point at which the achievement of ‘democracy’ was proclaimed. The concept of representative democracy evolved as a part of the process itself. But at some ill-defined point in this evolution political parties emerged as the central actors of the democratic drama. In the communist states the starting point was quite different, both in context and in the *dramatis personae*. A single-party monopoly directed society on the basis of its claim to command the precepts of scientific socialism in order to construct an egalitarian society free from exploitation and alienation. Under communist party auspices economic development was substantial, if skewed to the industrial sector. Urbanisation was extensive. Levels of education were high. The franchise was universal, and efficient mechanisms of electoral administration were in place. The dysfunctions of the political-economic system, however, were acute, and attempts to reform the system gathered pace, triggering three different sorts of regime change. The ‘modes of exit’ from communism were crucial because they reflected the balance of political forces that determined the nature of the initial post-communist élites; this in turn affected the decisiveness of the break with the old regime and established the initial reform trajectory.

**Regime change in post-communist Europe**

In the first type of regime change élites with rather varied transformative agendas took over existing states through the electoral process. This was the case in those independent states of Eastern Europe that had comprised...
the former ‘Soviet bloc’. There was a clear turning point, namely the acceptance by existing power holders of the principle of holding competitive elections to parliament. Once these elections were held, the new parliamentarians enjoyed the legitimacy of popular support and the authority their roles conveyed. State capacity was not in question, despite the fragility of the economies.

Circumstances in the Soviet Baltic republics and Slovenia provided an intermediate category. The key difference was the calling into question of the nature of the state itself. In the USSR the reform process snowballed into an avalanche of demands from the small republics of the periphery – notably the Balts, Moldova, Armenia, and Georgia. Demands for independence escalated and these republics enjoyed considerable de facto independence before the formal de jure dissolution of the Soviet Union, after new élites took over as a consequence of republican-level elections. The tasks of these élites included a wider agenda, namely that of state-building. Slovenia also belongs in this category, though with reform pressures coming from the Yugoslav republics, rather than from the centre. But similarly, de facto independence preceded international recognition and new élites came to power as a result of competitive elections. State-building, while having a strong foundation in the extensive autonomy of the Yugoslav federal model, none the less posed specific challenges to the new Slovene élites. In all four cases those elected to parliament had popular support for a platform of transformation.

Russia and the Ukraine were quite distinctive in the absence of popular nationalist movements. Independence came as a by-product of élite actions, with the death of the USSR pronounced by the leaders of the Russian and Ukrainian (and Belorussian) republics on 12 December 1991. The existing parliaments remained in place with small opposition factions, though support for Ukrainian independence was confirmed in the December referendum and the election of a new president. There were significant differences to be sure. Boris Yeltsin had been elected in June 1991 as the first directly elected Russian president. His commitment to radical economic transformation led rapidly to acute tensions between the executive and the Russian parliament. In the Ukraine, President Kravchuk effectively coopted the nationalist opposition for the primacy of the state-building project. In both cases the new states were weaker than their progenitor suggested, and in Russia in particular the centre could not ensure its remit in the new republics and regions. In neither case, moreover, were there mechanisms for the popular articulation of political views. There were no organised political opposition movements nor viable political parties. The communist parties were (temporarily) banned, but the nomenklatura remained effectively entrenched, poised to take advantage of the redistribution of assets. Despite the pervasive rhetoric of democratic commitment, free elections were delayed for some years. There was no inclination to follow even the vaguest