

Weak democracies under pressure, 1918 and 1989 in comparison¹

Dieter Segert, *University of Vienna*

ORCID ID: 0000-0001-8167-1559

Abstract

The article is concerned with the recent crisis of representative democracy. It analyses especially the features and conditions of the democratic decay in East-Central Europe. The method of the study consists mainly in a thorough interpretation of different data from the field of social, political and economic transitions during and after the 1990s. Additionally, the article examines the fate of democratic regimes in the interwar period and the causes of its weakness. The population's expectations towards political transformations was a major driving factor of politics in both periods of time in East-Central Europe. The article tries to answer the question how to deal successfully with the democracy crises in the region. The stabilisation of democratic politics would need both a strong social policy on the basis of an economic catch up with the West and a careful handling of the fears of "globalization".

Keywords: democracy crises; political alienation between politicians and electorate; rise of national populist parties; decay of democratic regimes in Interwar period; Zeitgeist and population's expectations as driving forces of politics; social and cultural conditions of a stable democracy.

Kruche demokracje pod presją: perspektywa porównawcza roku 1918 i 1989

Streszczenie

Artykuł dotyczy ostatniego kryzysu demokracji przedstawicielskiej. Analizuje on zwłaszcza cechy i warunki rozpadu demokracji w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej. Metoda badania polega głównie na dokładnej interpretacji różnych danych z zakresu przemian społecznych, politycznych i gospodarczych w latach 90. i później. Dodatkowo artykuł analizuje losy reżimów demokratycznych w okresie międzywojennym i przyчины ich słabości. Oczekiwania społeczeństw w odniesieniu do przemian politycznych były głównym czynnikiem napędzającym politykę w obydwu badanych okresach w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej. Artykuł próbuje odpowiedzieć na pytanie, jak skutecznie radzić sobie z kryzysem demokracji w regionie: stabilizacja demokratycznych wspólnot potrzebowałaby zarówno silnej polityki społecznej opartej na procesie nadrobienia zaległości w rozwoju gospodarczym w stosunku do Zachodu, jak i ostrożnego obchodzenia się z obawami przed „globalizacją”.

¹ The Paper was prepared for the conference: „1918 – 1938 – 2018: Beginnt ein autoritäres Jahrhundert?“ in Schloss Eckartsau, 4-7.09.2018; Panel 8: Post-Communist Democracies Renegotiated.

Słowa kluczowe: kryzysy demokracji, polityczna alienacja między politykami a elektoratem, powstanie narodowych partii populistycznych, rozkład reżimów demokratycznych w okresie międzywojennym, *Zeitgeist* i oczekiwania społeczeństw jako siły napędowe polityki, społeczne i kulturowe warunki stabilnej demokracji.

Political scientist Samuel Huntington discovered three waves of democratization that have determined politics since the early 19th century. His thesis of a wavelike political progress was often quoted. However, it was less often mentioned that Huntington has also pointed to a regular backlash that succeeded every democratic wave. Concerning the region East-Central Europe democracy was in danger at two times already, both after the first wave of democratization during the twenties and thirties of the 20th century, and after the third wave in the present times.

The picture of a wavelike progress and its respective backlashes is indeed a coherent description of politics but it does not answer the question about the reason of the democratic decay. However, there are several answers possible depending on the different understanding of democracy. My own argumentation is based on modernization theories. Democracy regarding them is as a product of manifold societal modernisation processes. Its difficulties are rooted in tensions between different tasks of modernisation. In particular, they stem from drifting apart of population's expectations, politician's pledges and the final results of political change.

At the beginning, I will demonstrate my assumptions on example of the crisis of democratic politics in East-Central Europe after 1989, in particular I will describe events and processes in Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. In a second step I am going to compare recent trends with the political development during the interwar period. At the end, I will try to draw some conclusions about a possible change for the better of the state of democracy in the region.

The recent crisis of democracy and its general conditions in East-Central Europe

In my opinion, a crisis of representative democracy is already on the way since about 2005. This assumption is backed by an analysis of party politics in East-Central Europe (Segert 2008).

Soon after their accession to the European Union (EU) in 2004, four East-Central European countries began experiencing unexpectedly serious problems. Attila Ágh spoke about a post-accession crisis (Ágh 2005). Since then there was a rise of populist

politics in Poland and Slovakia and of political instability in Czech Republic. Since 2010, populist parties were emerging in Czech Republic too. The first was the party “Věci veřejné” (Public Affairs), then came “Úsvit” (in 2017 as SPD, Party of direct Democracy) and ANO 2011. In 2017, this latter populist-liberal party won. A strong sign of the crisis consists in street demonstrations and political violence in Hungary in 2006. The next Hungarian elections brought about the absolute majority of seats by the national-populist party Fidesz and with JOBBIK an extreme right party into the parliament. In Poland, the second time PiS got into power in 2015.

Are these crises temporary or do they have a more serious quality? In my view, they have not come about by chance. Based on my analysis of the development of political parties in Eastern Europe, I have generated the thesis that this political instability is based on a *process of alienation* between the political classes and the citizenries of these countries, which in turn undermines the functioning of representative democracy. This questions our understanding of “consolidation of democracy”: all four countries are by the theoretical mainstream regarded as consolidated democracies.² Is it feasible that a consolidated democracy will finally glide into a serious instability? How to solve this discrepancy? I would argue that we should discuss more critically the prevailing understanding of “democratic consolidation”.

Table 1: Democracy scores by “Nations in transit” (2005-2017)

	2005	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2015	2016	2017
PL*	2.00	2.14	2.39	2.32	2.14	2.18	2.21	2.32	2.57
CZ*	2.29	2.25	2.14	2.21	2.18	2.25	2.21	2.25	2.25
SK*	2.00	1.96	2.29	2.68	2.50	2.61	2.64	2.61	2.61
H*	1.96	2.00	2.14	2.39	2.86	2.96	3.18	3.29	3.54

Consolidated democracy: 1.00-2.99; Semi-consolidated democracy: 3.00-3.9

*Country abbreviations correspondent the international licence tags

Another transformation index, Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI), combines economic and political performance and differentiates between highly advanced

² See: Freedom House WWW; Bertelsmann WWW; Merkel 2007: p. 423.

(all new member states of EU apart from Bulgaria and Romania), advanced or limited (the Balkans and, partly, the post-Soviet area). Both indices are of the opinion that ECE has made important progress on the way to stable democracies.

But the question rises whether the enormous social tensions in East-Central Europe during the transformation decade do not really influence the political stability? In order to get an impression about these tensions I will point only to some of the biggest hardships during the transformations decade: After 1989 economic outcomes especially of industry declined dramatically. That slump is named as “transformation recession”. (Table 2) In general, the GDP declined by between one fourth and one third. It lasted in average until the very end of the decade to achieve the starting level of the amount of products in 1989, only in Poland the economic recovery was faster.

Table 2: Transformation recessions in post-socialist Eastern Europe

Countries ³	First year of GDP decline	Years of decline in absolute term	Years of most drastic decline in percentage (year)	Year of return to the GDP per head in 1989
PL	1989	1989-91	11.6 (1990)	1995/96
CZ	1990	1990-92, 1997/98	11.6 (1991)	2000
SK	1990	1990-93	15.9 (1991)	1999
H	1990	1990-93	11.9 (1991)	1999/2000

Sources of the data: Kornai 2006: p. 213; Melzer 2003: p. 89, Clement et al. 2002, EBRD 2014 (latter for column 5).

Social consequences of this radical re-orientation in the economy could be expressed first and foremost by a radical inflation (in all East European states with the exceptions of East Germany, and Hungary) - there was for several years a strong jump of consumer prices. Poland was the strongest case in the region in this respect, inflation started earlier and lasted longer. (Table 3)

³ The abbreviations of the country's names are identically with the international licence tags.

Table 3: Inflation rate in percent (Increase of consumer prices during one year)

Countries	1990/1991	1992	1995	2000	2010	2011
PL	251 (1989) 585 (1990) 70.3 (1991)	43	27.8	10.1	2.7	3.9
CZ	52 (1991)	20.8 (1993)	9.6	3.9	1.2	2.1
SK	61,2 (1991)	23.2 (1993)	9.9	12.2	0.7	4.1
H	28,9 (1990) 35,0 (1991)	23.0	28.2	10.0	4.7	3.9

* Data at the rule from the end of the year, 12 months average; Source: EBRD 2014; Eurostat 2008; WIIW handbook 2010. Cases over 50 percent per year are bold highlighted.

Important part of the hardships in everyday life was the rise of unemployment (see table 4). It is not only about figures, it is about a deep break in everyday life: In the former economic order workers were in good position because of the shortage of working hands. Experiences in handling unemployment had only parts of working population in Yugoslavia, Hungary and Poland (the latter two only starting from the late eighties). In all other countries unemployment was a completely and unpleasant new phenomenon of the transformation period.

Table 4: Unemployment rates in Eastern Europe after 1989 in percent*

	1990	1995	2000	2005	2008	2010	2013
PL	6.5	14.9	15.1 [7.4]	17.6 [10.3]	7.1 [2.4]	9.6	10.3
CZ	0.7	4.0	8.3 [4.4]	7.5 [4.4]	5.4 [2.2]	7.2	7.3
SK	1.2	13.1	18.0 [11.3]	15.3 [11.7]	9.5 [6.6]	13.8	14.5
H	1.4	10.2	6.4 [3.1]	7.3 [3.2]	7.8 [3.6]	11.0	11.2

Data from the end of the year if not indicated; in square brackets: long-term unemployment; Sources: EBRD 2014, Eurostat 2008; The World Bank data; WIIW handbook 2010. Unemployment over about 15 percent are accentuated by bold grey figures.

The data is really impressive, but it allows only an estimation of the level of social problems. It should be considered too that there was a strong reduction of the amount of working population. The labour force participation rate was reduced at 17 percent in the average of the new EU-member states between 1989 and 2003. In Hungary the reduction was up to one quarter of the former level (Kornai 2006: p. 230). There was a high level of exclusion of certain social groups: older generations of employees, women to a great extent, industrial workers from big enterprises with out-dated machines, employees from the former agrarian cooperatives. All groups could be regarded as losers of transformation.

A question could be⁴, why the political troubles started only in 2005/6 if the economic hardships of the transition decade – what means in the nineties – were responsible for that? Why the voters did not react during the first, very difficult years to that? My answer is the following: not direct influence of the social decline that the losers have suffered was responsible for their reaction. It was the combination of social facts and a socio-psychological factor that matters. In 1989, within the legitimisation crisis of state socialism, there was an overwhelming hope of populations' majorities that the systemic change would bring all of them a much better life. The hope lasts several years. Only when after more than ten years and additionally the joining of EU in 2004 there was no clear amendment for a bigger part of population the hopes were dying. The transformation losers had finally realised that the transformation had brought about steady results already. Additionally, the rise of a small group of super-rich made the social difficulties for many people especially impressive. The last corner stone of the democracy crisis was the emergence of political entrepreneurs who exploited the situation for its own favour. The populists used the feeling of betrayal and pointed to corrupted politicians.

What are the main signs of the crisis of representative democracy in East Central Europe?

1) *In these countries, parties inspire an extremely low level of confidence.*

There is in general relatively little confidence in institutions. Confidence in political parties hovers around the extreme regional average of seven percent (i.e., eighty-two percent do not trust the parties). (Candidate countries Eurobarometer WWW: p. 5). It is useful to compare this to the situation in the EU-15. In those countries these figures were at fifteen percent in 2003, i.e. double those in Eastern Europe.

⁴ I owed this question to Jerzy Wiatr at a conference in Wrocław in September 2017.

2) *The population's willingness to participate is very low.*

This can be measured by the parties' membership figures and rates of participation in elections. As far as the turnout is concerned, the trend points to relatively low rates. Poland also stands out here. Its fifty-four percent voter participation in the parliamentary elections in 2007 was only given so much attention because the previous election had attracted a mere forty-one percent to the polls. 2011 the turnout was again slightly below 50 percent, in 2015 slightly above this figure. In Czech Republic the turnout was at around 60 percent in the last three elections. In Slovakia it was the same. Only in Hungary, the rate still remained between 62 and 68 percent.

3) *All countries have shown increasing trends towards populist politics*

Populist politics is understood basically as a parasitic behaviour on the part of politicians in the face of this kind of alienation since it appears to be a proven mean of bridging the gap between the political class and the population. The issue that must be examined is whether this is a transitional phenomenon or rather a symptom of a more profound crisis of representative democracy.

How to interpret the situation that a democracy, after all democratic institutions were installed, emerged is gliding into a crisis? The prevailing theories of democracy make no provision for a democracy being subsequently deconsolidated. But our theses are based on experiences from the Western European past where such retrograde developments did not occur after World War II. The interwar period is in my opinion not comparable: The Weimar Republic was not a consolidated democracy when it fell down. Other counter argument could come from Italy where a new party system developed after 1992. But even in this case the constitutional order of society remained stable, at least until the last elections.

So, are the obvious signs of crisis in East-Central Europe since 2005 a temporary or permanent phenomenon? In my view, the alienation I have described between politics and society in the democracies of East-Central Europe and the populism smouldering there provide a direct route to the answer. How and why did this alienation come about?

The starting point of the political instability lays already in high expectations towards the process of systemic changeover, which emerged in the crisis of the socialist welfare model. In the last years before 1989 there was a competition between East and West for the best model of consumer society. As the socialist model failed, the hopes aimed on a better life of all citizens shifted towards the counterpart of the competition, to the capitalist West. The shift to the successful Western model in 1989/90 was

then linked to the hope of achieving the same goal of prosperity for all people by new means. But the reality was different and the social bottom line of the system changeover remains mixed.

The frustrations are not only caused by eventually too high popular expectations but as well by the effect of an attempt to catch up with a “moving target”. In the moment of the decay of the “consumption socialism” *the prevailing capitalist model itself started to change*. In the 1980s and parallel to the crisis of state socialism in Eastern Europe it has begun a new phase of global capitalism. The old welfare capitalism had likewise entered a crisis. Thus, the Eastern European population was striving for a model for success that was already on the way out in its place of origin.

More than this: Eastern Europe was transformed into a laboratory for an especially rapid and vigorous implementation of the basic tendency started in the 1980s in the West. The original hopes of the Eastern European population that they would be able to take over a model promising to link economic efficiency with freedom and social equality were thus fundamentally frustrated⁵.

Why the new democracies crashed one’s already in the interwar period?

A crisis could hold a new chance of stabilisation of democracy too. That is the optimistic version of the thesis. However, our historical knowledge advises us to be more cautious. 1989 was already the second attempt to become a democracy. And it failed for the second time. The former experience during the interwar period could be described as follows in figure 1 (Segert 2002: p. 36).

After the end of the World War I and the disintegration of three empires (and the demise of a fourth one) many new states have emerged in the interspace between Germany and Russia. They had more or less democratic constitutions at the beginning.

How was the situation in the three East-Central European states in particular: Poland got a chance for the overcoming of the long period of partition already before the end of the war. The new-born independent Polish state was declared at 7 October 1918 in Warsaw. In 1921 a Constitution was ratified, what made Poland a parliamentary republic with a weak President as head of state. Second case is Czechoslovakia: Since 1915 the Czech philosopher and politician Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk has worked on the founding of a common state of the Czechs and the Slovaks. He tried to get sup-

⁵ The first part of the paper was in a former version printed already in Segert 2018.

port for this aim by the Entente coalition. After the military defeat of Austria-Hungary there was the moment to realise his intent. The first democratic Czechoslovakia was declared on October 28, 1918. Its constitution followed the constitutional principles of the Third French Republic. The third state was Hungary: Politicians of four parties founded an independent Hungarian state in autumn 1918 too. Head of the provisory government became count Mihály Károlyi. He proclaimed the Republic of Hungary on November, 16th.

Figure 1: Processes of change in East-Central Europe in the interwar period

PoliticalRegime Year	Democracy	Endangered Democracy	Dictatorship
1920	ČSR PL		H
1927	ČSR	PL H	
1938	ČSR		PL H

Explanation: Assessment of the political change in East-Central Europe during the interwar period; the more the country name is placed on the right of the panel the less the respective quality of the political regime is given.

In January next year he became its president. The new state had to ride out soon the disintegration of the traditional territories: Transylvania became part of Romania, Slovakia (called formerly “Upper Hungary”) was integrated into Czechoslovakia. Hungary was not able to avoid its territorial decay due to the fact that the Entente has backed and legitimised it. The new state rushed into a deep crisis. Károlyi stepped back and a Soviet Republic emerged, followed soon by the Horthy dictatorship.

In East-Central Europe democratic republics emerged after the war, in South-Eastern Europe the predominant type of regime was a constitutional monarchy. The borders were tailored by the European big powers, mainly influenced by the geopolitical interests of

France. The political systems were originally strongly influenced by a demonstration effect. The political order of the victors of the war was the role model.⁶ The constitution of the Third French was the paradigm. Some basic points were: a strong position of the parliament, political parties as the main political actors, pure proportional representation without any election threshold, and the independence of judiciary.

These young democracies did not remain stable for long as it was indicated already in the figure above. At latest, in the second half of the thirties the democracies were removed by more or less authoritarian regimes. The democracy in Hungary was very early destroyed by a bloody struggle between radical left and right actors. After that, the political rights of the population were strongly diminished, there was in fact no opposition allowed, and the traditional elites have governed by force. In Poland after a *coup d'état* in May 1926 the political parties were deprived of power. The slogan of this politics was “Sanacja”, the healing of the society from political bickering. The aim was the establishment of a strong Polish state. Czechoslovakia was for long time the only exception. It remained a democratic island within the authoritarian look. However, the democratic state was not without authoritarian elements that have enforced after the dead of the state founder Masaryk in 1935.

Why have the democratic and liberal principals proved to be so weak? Which main factors caused the authoritarian revival? In 2002 I wrote about it: “Beneath the surface of a liberal democracy there was another kind of reality, which was rising in the moment when the manifold social, economic, and cultural conflicts of these respective societies started to intensify themselves.” (Segert 2002: p. 35)

Among the appearing problematic features were: a high degree of political instability, e.g. in Poland 14 governments were built in only 6 years, sharp ethnic-national conflicts and the representation of each specific group in a particular party system, and a frequent use of violence in politics.

The ethnic composition of the new emerging states in the interwar period was very plural. (see Table 5).

Most important was the mix of peoples in every country mainly because of the dominant cultural understanding of the nation. The self-conception of the state was that of a pure ethnic-nation state, defined by the ethnic majority, either the Poles or the Hungarians or the Czechoslovaks. The self-confidence of national minorities was regarded as a threat to the nation-state. The crux was the liability of the new-born state

⁶ Compare: Segert 2002, chapter 2.2.

structures. The Polish president Narutowicz was murdered by a right nationalist in 1920 because he was backed by the different ethnic minorities. In Czechoslovakia the big German minority was not in favour of a political separation from Germany and Austria and declined the new state. This resistance was crushed down by force. Until 1926 no German politician took part in Czechoslovak governments. In the 1930s started a new German-nationalistic movement that was exploited by Hitler for the demolition of the Czechoslovak state in 1938-1939. In Hungary the main ethnic conflict was between Hungarians and the minority of Jews.

Table 5: Ethnic differentiation of the population ECE (in percent)

	PL	ČSR	H
Share of ethnic majority	68.9	64.3*	92.1
Share of the biggest ethnic minority	13.9 (Ukrainians)	22.3 (Germans)	5.5 (Germans)

*Share of Czechs and Slovaks together (as „Czecho-Slovaks“); Source: Segert 2002: p. 41

In order to explain the change from democracy to dictatorship in the interwar period more in detail two points should be added. Firstly, the different level of modernisation of the respective societies. Democratisation and societal modernisation are interconnected processes. The higher level of stability of the democratic institutions in the case of the Czechoslovak state could be explained by the fact that the respective society was more industrialised and more modern in cultural terms as the other two societies in East-Central Europe. To bring one example for that: in Czechoslovakia the political parties were of a more developed type. A kind of modern class party prevailed there, whereas in Hungary the predominant party was a traditional clientelistic network lead by notabilities. These clientelistic networks have changed often its names but were governing unaltered over many years the country (Segert 1994: p. 16–17). Secondly, the national politics were heavily influenced by an on-going change of the international regime. Whereas the international order straight after the end of WWI has been coined by France and its democratic constitution, later on, the right authoritarian regimes in Europe became more and more influential. First, the Italian Fascism has influenced the neighbouring countries like Hungary and Austria,

subsequent the German authoritarian regime get hegemonic in nearly all parts of East-Central and South-Eastern Europe. The *Zeitgeist* has clearly changed. A strong state lead by a powerful personality had placed the former role model of a liberal democracy.

What could be done for a sustainable state of democracy in the region?

Summing up, I try to draw some conclusions from the comparison of two periods of problematic democratisation in East-Central Europe.

Firstly, I have to write about the *Zeitgeist*: East-Central Europe represents a peripheral region in relation to the economic more developed West and North of Europe. The inner dynamic of politics in the region is clearly determined by the impulses coming from the centre. The predominant influence could be named as the “*Zeitgeist*”. Straight after 1918 and 1989 the liberal democracy was the role model all over Europe. Therefore, the democratic forces in the peripheral East-Central Europe were strongly fortified. Later on, in the very centre there was a change of the “*Zeitgeist*”. Now, a nationalistic interpretation of the state, and a powerful leader became the predominant understanding of a successful politics. Strictly viewed, although the specific role models in the interwar period and in the present differ from each other in detail, there is a common tendency away off a liberal democracy.

The second argument: the field of politics is delimited by both the aims of hegemonic politicians and expectations of population’s majorities. At the end of WWI, prevailing patterns of politics in the region were coined by ethnic-national movements. However, the profile of leading politicians in the respective countries have differed. Personalities matter especially in the case of tension between social and cultural currents. The thesis will be explained here at the comparison between the Polish and the Czechoslovak state founders Piłsudski and Masaryk (Segert 1994: p. 19 et seqq., here p. 20, 22): „Masaryk was a philosopher. [...] His understanding of democracy was determined by the 19th century credo of an unavoidable progress of mankind. Correspondently, societies were on the track towards a kind of decision making based on rational arguments. [...] For Masaryk democracy was an order that has emanated from steady discussions.” In difference to that the central political value of Piłsudski „was a strong state. Its strength resulted from centralisation and consistency, and this way it can secure both the viability of the nation and the care

for the poorest citizens". In order to achieve these aims, Piłsudski has striven for a lower level of political conflicts by cutbacks of the rights of political parties and by manipulating the elections⁷.

The substance of politics stems greatly from the intensions and expectations of the majority of populations and its interactions with the intentions of the politicians. After 1918, in the founding situation of new states, nationalistic sentiments swept over East-Central Europe. The ideas of 1989 in difference emerged from the crisis of the state socialist order. Precondition was a political contestation between Western capitalism and Eastern socialism for the best way of life that has won by the West. The hegemonic idea in 1989 was the conviction that the realisation of democracy means both political freedom and social prosperity. The initial hardships were perceived as bearable; there was the hope that the next elected government could solve the problem. However, after a certain period of time, this hope faded away. Frustration about the democracy was propagated within the region. Populist parties started to rise.

And, the third assumption: The comparison proves that the interplay of social interests and cultural interpretations could challenge democratic institutions to a high degree. In the interwar period cultural conflicts were in the foreground. Nevertheless, social policies matters too. A condition of the democratic stability of Czechoslovakia was a successful land reform. In the present, social frustrations matter the most. However, the mobilisation of cultural fears plays a role too. The stabilisation of democratic politics would need in both a strong social policy on the basis of an economic catch up with the West and of a careful handling of the fears of "globalisation".

And, at the end, again the *Zeitgeist*: The transformation of the capitalist order towards neoliberalism was pushed by a certain understanding of state politics and its interconnection with the market. To overcome the crisis of representative democracy in East-Central Europe a new change of the mighty "Zeitgeist" is needed. It should be a change in direction of more solidarity within and between societies. Rivalry between individuals should be complemented by supporting each other; the competition between states should be limited, first of all, in the framework of the European Union. Democracy as a political order could be stabilised only if it is complemented by a society and a culture that rank high social equality and equal chances for individual development.

⁷ A similar comparison would be possibly fruitful for the present if one takes into account such diverge personalities like Havel and Klaus or Wałęsa and Kaczyński.

Dieter Segert – born 1952 in GDR, studied philosophy in Berlin and Moscow. Academic career: since 1978 assistant and later professor at Humboldt University in Berlin, 1993–1998 prof. of political science at the same place; 1998–2001: guest professor at Charles university Prague; 2001–2005: employee of the Federal Agency for Civic Education (Bonn); 2005–2017: prof. of East European Area Studies at the University of Vienna.

E-mail: dieter.segert@univie.ac.at

Dieter Segert – urodzony w 1952 w Niemieckiej Republice Demokratycznej. Studia filozoficzne w Berlinie i Moskwie. Kariera akademicka: od 1978 roku asystent, a następnie profesor na Uniwersytecie Humboldta w Berlinie; w latach 1993–1998 profesor nauk politycznych na tymże Uniwersytecie; w latach 1998–2001 profesor wizytujący na Uniwersytecie w Pradze; w latach 2001–2005 pracownik Federalnej Agencji Edukacji Obywatelskiej (Bonn); w latach 2005–2017 profesor w Katedrze Badań nad Europą Środkową na Uniwersytecie Wiedeńskim.

Adres e-mail: dieter.segert@univie.ac.at

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