

Trust and Democratic Transition in Post-Communist Europe

One of the first British Academy International Symposia, and the first to be held at the Academy, was 'Trust as a precondition to communication, social thinking and social practices during democratic transition in post-communist Europe'. The symposium took place in the Academy on 13–15 September 2001 and was organised on behalf of the Academy by Professor Ivana Marková FBA. The main partner organisation from abroad was the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in Paris. Thirty-four scholars studying trust in different human and social sciences were invited to take part in the symposium. They came from the UK, France, Russia, the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary. Here Professor Marková summarises the event.

Why trust?

During the last two decades, questions about trust and distrust have attracted a great deal of attention in various aspects of professional and everyday life, as well as in the social and human sciences. What is the meaning of trust, under what conditions is it reasonable to trust individuals and institutions, what are the specific characteristics of trust and distrust? – all these issues have become prominent.

The question of whether democracy requires trusting relations can evoke diverse and even contradictory answers. On the one hand, specialists argue that an increase in individualistic tendencies within the traditional democracies leads to a decline in trust and sociability, to a rise in violent crime and civil litigation, and in general to a collapse of shared and communal values. For example, Sir Stewart Sutherland argued two years ago at a workshop in Edinburgh on 'citizenship' that the present society has drained itself of trust, which in turn poses problems for democracy. On the other hand, one finds claims that liberalism and liberal democracy arose from a distrust of traditional political and clerical institutions. To trust is to accept risk. Therefore it is essential that democratic institutions should not be trusted, and instead should be independently controlled. As this argument goes, distrust reduces the risk of citizens being harmed. Consequently, democracy and trust seem to be related in obverse fashion.

The situation in post-communist countries highlights other problems. The totalitarian regimes in Europe, which collapsed in 1989, had presented themselves as totally trustworthy. Their rhetoric was couched in terms of 'humanity', the 'well-being of the individual and society', and 'equality' among people. Yet the majority distrusted the regimes and this distrust was mingled with fear. Following the political revolutions in Europe in 1989, one of the priorities was to re-establish respect for the individual and for communities, as

it had been drastically reduced or eliminated during totalitarianism and in its aftermath.

The symposium at the Academy had two main strands. The first strand put into perspective the historical, cultural and conceptual nature of trust and the political significance of trust in post-communist Europe (papers by D. Gambetta and H. Hamill, R. Harré, G. Hosking, J. Kochanowitz, I. Marková, P. Wattier). Within this theme topics ranged from analyses of the concept and meanings of trust, to the examination of social solidarity in Russia, the Soviet Union and Poland. A round table discussion focused on *Trust as a precondition for communication* and was led by the scholarly contributions of G. Duveen and H. Joffe.

The second strand explored trust/distrust in different post-communist countries and in countries with traditional democracies. Lectures by W. Dressler, O. Galland, N. Letki and G. Evans, Y. Levada, P. Macek, W.L. Miller, T.Y. Koshechkina and Å.B. Grödeland, and J. Szalai were based on both theoretical analyses and empirical research. The main topics addressed were the specific meanings of political trust, problems of 'state-desertion', and social trust and civic participation in post-communist societies. Those papers that were focused on specific countries examined: some ambiguities in thinking and language about trust and distrust in Russia; loyalty building in Kazakhstan, Moldova and Estonia; and the meanings of trust in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Russia, Scotland and France. The round table discussion on *Trust, distrust and democracy* was inspired by the provocative insights of A.H. Brown and J.M. Dunn.

Trust in traditional and modern societies

One of the significant features of the symposium was its interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary nature, bringing cultural, historical, political,

The British Academy has recently launched a new initiative of promoting collaborative international activities. As part of this initiative, the Overseas Policy Committee has established a scheme to support special symposia organised by the Academy together with an appropriate partner institution from abroad.

philosophical, sociological and social psychological perspectives. This diversity of perspective was accompanied by an emphasis on the polysemic nature of the notion of trust, and how meanings of trust and distrust varied in different languages and cultures.

Some theoretical themes of the symposium focused on trust/distrust as a fundamental feature of human communication and social relations. One may argue that trust/distrust has developed through anthropogenesis, culture and history as an essential characteristic of humanity. Humans have created the world in terms of others. Language and communication are orientated towards others' language and others' world. In this sense, the relation of trust and distrust can be conceived as a dialogical rationality.

Other theoretical themes focused on trust/distrust in modern societies and their institutions. In pre-modern societies, social relations in kinship and in local communities were closely knit and underpinned by religious cosmology and traditions, which took various forms. In Russia, as Geoffrey Hosking showed, these relations took the form of a special kind of solidarity in the village commune, known as 'krugovaya poruka'. This phenomenon of joint responsibility has been deeply rooted for centuries in Russian culture. The village commune had a collective responsibility for social goods and evils. For instance, it was responsible for the prevention of criminality, for settling conflicts, paying taxes and for the upkeep of common facilities. It exerted control over individuals, overseeing their private lives. Interestingly and surprisingly, this old custom lived on through the Soviet regime and its aftermath, and remains an important aspect of public life in Russia today. During the Soviet regime, 'krugovaya poruka' transformed itself into new forms. With the development of the Soviet enterprise, it travelled to towns and became a feature of grand communal apartments. It became highly functional in the Soviet regime, which had aimed to become an egalitarian society with maximum resources, but which became instead a hierarchical society with minimum resources. Communes in villages and cities were based on informal and efficient interchanges similar to the traditional 'krugovaya poruka'. Through these they were able to mobilise every possibility of survival in difficult economic conditions. Hosking argued that after the collapse of the Soviet regime, the economic reforms of Gorbachev and Yeltsin were unpopular, largely because they brought alien elements of the market into old customs. They introduced new types of social relations based on exchange which threatened the strong traditions of informal bonds.

Trust in modern European societies, many authors argue, is a different kind of phenomenon. From the sixteenth century onward, with the decline of pre-modern societies and social structures in Europe, modern concepts of trust and distrust developed along with new institutions and concepts of individualism. The concept of trust, in this process, became associated with the calculation of risk, probabilities of success and

failure and with confidence and danger. Trust, in this sense, is a concept that results from decision-making procedures based on the assessment of costs and gains.

Trust and totalitarianism

One of the essential characteristics of totalitarian regimes in communist Europe was their persistent effort to stimulate mutual distrust among the general public. In fact one could argue that to induce distrust is something that characterises all regimes of terror. The French writer, dramatist and a Nobel Prize winner for literature in 1915, Romain Rolland, was preoccupied in his dramas on the French Revolution with struggles between trust and justice on the one hand, and the desire to save one's country by sacrificing truth and trust on the other. In his drama *Les Loups (Morituri)*, he describes the system of terror in the French revolution where 'la défiance mutuelle fait la sûreté publique!' (mutual distrust maintains public security). But distrust was not just a calculation, it was mingled with fear: 'Qui de nous mourra le premier?' (Which of us will die first?).

Similarly, the inducement of uncertainty, the creation of distrust in communication and the propagation of fear helped to maintain the stability of the totalitarian regimes that dominated European countries two hundred years after the French Revolution. The papers presented at the symposium showed that distrust in post-communist countries is largely associated both with the uncertainty and ambiguity that the new institutions display, and with a fear persisting from the past.

In general, 'trust' is a highly polysemic term, which is embedded in socio-economic and cultural-historical conditions. It has specific meanings in pre-modern and modern societies, in rural societies and in cities, in history and in the present. But even these distinctions are not subtle enough to fit the different types of transition from pre-industrial to industrial societies. For example, in contrast to Czechoslovakia, total collectivisation in agriculture during communism was never achieved in Poland; and this is reflected in differing natures of social relations of trust and distrust in the two countries (J. Kochanowitz).

Rather than attempting to bring together all the multifaceted characteristics of trust and distrust, the studies presented at the symposium stressed heterogeneity, although 'founded on rational specificity' (Miller, Koshechkina and Grødeland). They highlighted the differentiated notions of political distrust. Factors governing the specific forms and origins of distrust range from trust as a matter of passion and emotion to trust as a calculation of risk. The provocative presentations and lively discussions at the symposium indicate that the questions of trust and democracy open up a new field for the social and human sciences.

Professor Marková is editing a volume based on the symposium to be published in the *Proceedings of the British Academy*.