

REVIEWS

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***CENTRAL & EAST EUROPEAN POLITICS: FROM COMMUNISM TO DEMOCRACY*, SHARON L. WOLCHIK & JANE LEFTWICH CURRY, EDS., THIRD EDITION, ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD, LANHAM, BOULDER, NEW YORK, LONDON 2015, pp. 550.**

After the Autumn of Nations, the region of Central and Eastern Europe became the stage of dynamic change toward democracy and a free market economy. Within several years, most countries in the region joined NATO and EU, and became examples of effective and rapid transition from authoritarianism to democracy. While bloody armed conflict did break out on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, the Dayton accords of 1995 put an end to the fighting and the post-Yugoslav countries also embarked on the path leading to systemic change.

In 2016 the situation looked much less optimistic though. In many countries of Central and Eastern Europe, economic and social problems had been on the rise and political tensions had become increasingly sharp. Normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo remains elusive; twenty years after the Dayton accords, stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina is still precarious; many countries of the region are facing a huge influx of illegal immigrants; in March 2014 Russia annexed Crimea and the prospects for ending the crisis in Ukraine and stabilizing that country remain dim. As the editors of the third edition of the book *Central & East European Politics: From Communism to Democracy* Sharon L. Wolchik and Jane Leftwich Curry put it: ‘In 2010, we concluded that (...) these countries [Central and East European – JZ] had become or were on their way to becoming “normal” European countries. In 2014, this answer seems too optimistic, and their futures appear less clear’ (p. 525).

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With the third edition of *Central & East European Politics: From Communism to Democracy*, the reader gets an up-to-date picture of the situation in Central and Eastern Europe. The book analyzes the successes the countries of this region have had on the road from communism to democracy during the post-Cold War transformations, and highlights challenges and problems they continue to face as well as the causes of such difficulties. A major value of this work is that it adopts a comprehensive approach to the subject and takes political, economic and cultural aspects of the transformations into account. Very wisely, in the *Introduction* the Editors decided to present a synthesis of the region's history, as it is difficult to understand contemporary events in the region while ignoring historical factors, which affect contemporary politics throughout the region. An interesting example of this is Poland, where the geographical line of today's political divisions, as illustrated by electoral results, usually coincides with the boundary between the former Prussian and Russian partitions: In the country's western portion, once a part of the Prussian partition, the winner of the parliamentary elections in 2007 and 2011 was Civic Platform – a centrist party with a liberal economic program; in areas that once formed the Russian partition, the winner was Law and Justice – a rightist and nationalist party supporting social market economy. A similar pattern was also observed during the presidential elections of 2005, 2010 and 2015, and during the elections to the European Parliament in 2004, 2009 and 2014. The other countries of Central and Eastern Europe were also for a long time under the control of Prussia, Russia, Austria or the Ottoman Empire. The influence of those different powers led to the emergence of distinct political and economic cultures, something that continues to influence the economic development of the region's countries and their citizens' stances on such social issues as attitudes towards women or sexual minorities. It is thus unusually important to place today's situation in Central and East European countries in a historical context, because this makes it possible to better understand those countries' different degrees of advancement in the transformation process. Even though the countries of Central and Eastern Europe occupy a relatively small area – about 20 per cent of the area of the US – they form, in the Editors' words, 'mosaics of different nationalities that have their own languages, religions, and cultures' (p. 8).

Reading is made easier by a logical division of the subject matter. The book is made up of two sections: the first treats of policies and issues, while the second contains case studies. Thanks to such a division, the reader receives information about a chosen topic or a specific country. Wolchik and Curry have very ably selected a team of competent authors, the chapters are rich in content, and they are written with an understanding of the region's specificity.

The first part (*Introduction*), written by the Editors, is followed by the second part (*Policies and Issues*) which provides a region-wide overview of the main political, economic, foreign policy and social issues that post-communist states have faced. The second part of the book begins with an article on political transition (chapter two) written by Valerie Bunce, who examines the main developments leading to the creation of a democratic political system, including factors that facilitate political change and those

that have delayed the establishment of democracy in other states. Bunce argues that the transition to democracy in Central and Eastern Europe proceeded in two stages: The first one (from 1989 to mid-1996), when half of the region rapidly moved toward democracy while the other half either got stuck in a dictatorship or remained suspended precariously between the two systems; and the second stage (from 1996 to 2014) when the ‘laggards’ in democratization all moved in a liberal direction. In chapter three, Sharon Fisher examines how political transformations were followed by economic ones and stresses the importance of two factors that determined the economic success of Central and East European countries, that is, different starting points and policy approaches, and the commitment of successive governments to pursuing reforms. What is more, she discusses tasks and strategies used to transform state-run economies to free market ones and shows the unintended consequences of elite policies on economic reforms. Fisher also mentions the profound social consequences of economic transition, which are examined in greater detail in the following chapter by Alfio Cerami. The latter discusses the main changes in labour structure, repercussions of those changes on social welfare and social problems and social pathologies which accompanied them (such as juvenile delinquency, drug abuse and trafficking) as well as the erroneous expectations of experts and policy makers with regard to the transformations – expectations which have hindered full democratic stabilization and consolidation. These two chapters, which provide a broad view of the economic and social dimension of transformations, are followed by Zsuzsa Csergő’s important discussion of ethnicity and nationalism. The author notes the difference between these two phenomena and stresses that although ethnic groups aim to reproduce particular cultures, only national groups claim self-government rights on a particular territory (p. 124). Csergő examines the political ramifications of ethnic issues in different Central and Eastern European countries as well as the plight of the Roma throughout the region. She shows how in most countries of the region, with the exception of former Yugoslavia, ethnic tensions have been defused through political means. Another problematic issue – that of women’s participation in politics – is analyzed in chapter six by Marilyn Rueschemeyer, who focuses on aspects of continuities and changes in women’s interest and participation in political life, the share of women among elected political representatives, the pursuit of women’s issues by elected women, and women leaders’ relation to various constituencies, especially women’s organizations. Rueschemeyer has concluded that although recently there have been increases in women’s political representation in some countries, women continue to play a secondary role in the political life beyond voting in the region. Another very important aspect of Central and Eastern European countries’ transition – the question of ‘transnational justice’ – is addressed by Peter Rožič and Brian Grodsky. In chapter seven they analyze the response of Central and East European governments to issues that arise from the communist past. As Rožič and Grodsky notice, through transnational justice, successor states to authoritarian regimes have sought to overcome the legacy of repression and justice. They examine the ways in which this process differed across this region and in the post-communist region in general as compared to cases

of democratization in other parts of the world. The chapter also discusses memory and memorialization of the past, phenomena that continue to affect politics in Central and East European countries.

That second part of the book also analyzes two other issues that are crucial for countries of the region: accession to NATO and to the European Union. As soon as the Warsaw Pact and the COMECON were dissolved (1991), most Central and East European countries aimed to join NATO and the EU in turn. The accession processes together with the main concerns and issues that they entailed are examined by Ronald H. Linden and Shane Killian (EU), and by Joshua Spero (NATO). Linden and Killian analyze the costs of EU membership, its impact in the region, the economic and Eurozone crisis, and the future of the EU in the Western Balkans and Ukraine, while Spero examines the new threats to European security from Russia, and how such threats affect NATO's presence in Central and East European countries and concepts of a NATO mission. It gives the reader a comprehensive overview of the changes that took place in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe after the end of the Cold War and the break-up of the Soviet Bloc.

The third part of *Central & East European Politics: From Communism to Democracy* focuses on case studies. The issues analyzed in the second part of the book are examined in relation to individual countries: Poland (Jane Leftwich Curry), the Czech and Slovak Republics (Sharon L. Wolchik), Hungary (Federigo Argentieri), the Baltic countries (Daina S. Eglitis), Bulgaria (Janusz Bugajski), Romania (Daniel Brett), Albania (Elez Biberaj), the former Yugoslavia and its successors (Mark Baskin, Paula Pickering), and Ukraine (Taras Kuzio). The book omits the German Democratic Republic and Belarus. As the editors correctly point out, East Germany is a specific case since it was reunified with West Germany while Belarus after a short period of transition reverted to authoritarian rule in 1994 under President Alexander Lukashenka. However, there is no explanation why the editors did not include Moldova. Readers might have been interested to know how this small post-Soviet republic fares with its transformation, as 25 per cent of its population is made up of national and ethnic minorities, and it has to deal with Transnistrian separatism.

All case study chapters share a common framework that helps present all the information in a well-ordered and comprehensive manner. Their authors start with brief summaries of the pre-communist and communist periods, analyze the period of the end of communism, and then focus on a number of common topics: the political system (the institutional structure of each state, elections and political parties, civil society and citizens' attitude towards politics), economic transition and its social consequences, as well as major trends in each country's foreign policy. The authors' research leads them to an interesting and quite accurate conclusion that there is a lack of a stable system of political parties in Central and East European countries, and that their citizens feel alienated from politics and are unwilling to be politically active. This trend is well noticeable in the emergence and functioning of civil society and citizen participation, which remain weaker than those in more established European democracies. A key question is how

long will it be before citizens become more willing to play an active part in political and public life? The current situation warrants the view that this process may last for decades. Every chapter of the third part of the book concludes by identifying issues specific to the countries they focus on and the main challenges they may face in the near future, thus bringing the reader a better understanding of each country's specificity. The fourth part of the volume (*Conclusions*) was written by the Editors and contains the book's main findings and a discussion of the usefulness of different approaches to countries of Central and East Europe and to the study of the region's political developments.

Central & East European Politics: From Communism to Democracy edited by Sharon L. Wolchik and Jane Leftwich Curry is highly recommended to everyone who is interested in developments in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as to students of political science, European studies, and international relations. Every chapter in the book includes a set of study questions that may be useful for student in-class debates. The authors also provided a short but very useful list of additional readings, including websites; thus *Central & East European Politics: From Communism to Democracy* can be recommended as an academic book. Equally importantly, the book not only gives comprehensive and detailed information on transformation in the countries of the region but also focuses the reader's attention on new challenges that those countries' leaders and citizens are presently facing and will likely continue to face in the near future. The region of Central and Eastern Europe, perceived as stable and peaceful, today faces various challenges that may lead to unexpected outcomes.

Sharon L. Wolchik is professor of political science at George Washington University. Jane Leftwich Curry is professor of political science at Santa Clara University. List of contributors: Valerie Bunce, Sharon Fisher, Kevin Deegan-Krause, Zsuzsa Csergo, Vello Pettai, Eva-Clarita Pettai, Ronald H. Linden, Joshua Spero, Federigo Argentieri, Daina S. Eglitis, Janusz Bugajski, Monica Ciobanu, Elez Biberaj, Mark Baskin, Paula Pickering, and Taras Kuzio. No customer reviews. Ed. Sharon L. Wolchik and Jane L. Curry. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008. xiv, 389 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Photographs.Â COPYRIGHT: Â© Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies. 2009. Recommend this journal. Email your librarian or administrator to recommend adding this journal to your organisation's collection. Slavic Review. ISSN: 0037-6779. EISSN: 2325-7784.