

Democracy and Populism in Central Europe: The Visegrad Elections and Their Aftermath

By Martin Bútorá, Oľga Gyárfášová, Grigorij Mesežnikov, Thomas W. Skladony (eds). Bratislava: Institute for Public Affairs, 2007.

Mass democracy and populism are two phenomena that have always been closely related to each other. In Central and Eastern Europe in particular, and in many other underdeveloped regions of the world as well, the national emancipation, democratization and populism went hand in hand. Populist politics incorporated and mobilized peasants into nationals and complemented weak (or absent) social democratic politics. Not only under state socialism, the populist 'golden era' of the first half of the twentieth century is felt in Eastern Europe to this day.

After the fall of state socialism populism became the major source of discussions among the analysts, policy experts as well as academics, as it represented danger for liberal-democratic consolidation. For some analysts, populism represented a threat to democracy – and it certainly did at least in certain periods of 1990s and in countries such as Slovakia, if we consider liberal-secular democracy as a desirable model for Central Europe – for others, populism represented a sort of democratic emancipation, inseparable from post-socialist transformation. Moreover, most of the experts argued that populism in countries like Slova-

kia, Poland or Hungary is a transitory phenomenon. They claimed that after establishing constitutional democracy, market economy and rule of law, confirmed in several consecutive and fair democratic elections, populism would vanish and idealized liberal democracy would flourish.

As the results of Visegrad election 2005 – 2006 showed, populism in Central Europe has had much more durable pedigree. For sufficient analysis of populism's continuing relevance today it seems to become less and less productive to focus predominantly on elites, party systems and formal politics and more and more desirable to look at wider social, economic and historical perspectives determining the successes of populism worldwide. The edited volume *Democracy and Populism in Central Europe: The Visegrad Elections and Their Aftermath*, the outcome of the conference organized in September 2006 in Bratislava by the *Institute for Public Affairs*, does not move the theme this way. Instead, it discusses democracy and populism from the perspective of formal politics and, partially, from the perspective of quantitatively approached electoral support. The diverse collective of contributors, politi-

cal scientists, sociologists, journalists, public-opinion analysts, and democracy practitioners bring, as the editors say in the preface, a fresh light on election campaigns, new coalition governments, trends in political culture and public opinion, the rise of populism and nationalism, bilateral and regional relations, and European Union integration of all four Visegrad countries. In my opinion, neither the diversity of experts nor wide scope of the themes brought the desirable cumulative effect. Perhaps this happened due to the fact that the book was not opened by the theoretically informed introduction and accompanied by the work of an uncharitable editor, as the rule for edited volumes requires.

There are three major themes that attempt to guide the reader through the book. Following general information on the Visegrad Elections of 2005 – 2006 (by Grigorij Mesežnikov), the first part deals with domestic politics in Slovakia (by Soňa Szomolányi) and public opinion (authors: Zora Bútorová, Oľga Gyárfášová, Vladimír Krivý). The same focus has the account on Czech politics (by Ivan Gabal), Poland (by Jacek Kucharczyk and Joanna Fomina), and Hungary (by László Kéri). The first block is enriched by the view of the radical right in Hungary (by Pál Tamás). At this point it would have been very interesting to learn about the radical right in a more comparative perspective and perhaps also to discuss the thin dividing line between national populism and neo-fascism.

Instead, the second block of papers follows a general line of contributions on trends and implications of populism in Eastern and Western Europe (by Kai-Olaf Lang), view on political party rotation (by Kevin D. Krause) and an essay of the notorious commentator on Central and Eastern European party politics, Jacques Rupnik (as a matter of curiosity, very similar article called *Populismus in Ostmitteleuropa* by the same author appeared also in *Transit – Europäische Revue*, 33/2007). The second round of contributions is, quite unexpectedly in this general section, concluded by Peter Učeň's perspective on ideology and political culture of populism in Slovakia.

The papers of Martin Bútorá, Robin Shepherd, and Tomáš Strážay open the third thematic block of the book. The authors discuss the impact of the 2005 – 2006 Visegrad elections on "European security, especially on the volatile Western Balkan region" (p. 7). The relationship between foreign policy and populism, otherwise very productive domain for further research, lacked clear theoretical and conceptual links and one of the authors (Strážay) discusses democracy export to the Balkan region from V4, but not populism. Although "the V4 countries now find themselves correspondingly constrained by the obligations that membership in these structures (i.e. NATO and EU, JB) demand" (Shepherd, p. 229), we do not learn much about the possible impact of populist success in V4 on European politics and security.

The contribution of Martin Bútorá introduces one of the well-known concepts for researching populism, that of 'illiberal democracy' (Zakaria). This concept can be successfully applied on the region such as Central Europe, as the author argues, however, at the same time, it should be stressed that the term equally as it explains also conceals the 'evolutionary' ideology underpinning it – that there is an ideal development path from backward illiberal Rest to the shining liberal West. This approach thus lacks holistic perspective and imposes an idealized concept on culturally different societies and idealizes the 'health' of liberal democracy in the West itself.

To conclude, populism in Central Europe emerged as a result of post-socialist transitional ruptures that have increased calls for a return to the harmonious past, in contrast to the actual insecurity and populist leaders usually reflected this development. The requirements of EU enlargement also contributed heavily to these ongoing changes and brought about the feeling of insecurity for many people. Especially the construction of national identities as well as structural features selectively reproduced from

an agrarian era and by state socialism – i.e. people's identifications with certain forms of politics – have not been analyzed sufficiently in the book (with a minor exception of Učeň). An added value of the book might be considered the attempt to analyze the impact of populism in V4 on European development and security. Unfortunately, this perspective did not enjoy the attention and consistency it deserved.

Nevertheless, the collective volume has reached some of the audience the editors aimed to reach, such as "policy makers, diplomats, journalists ... and civic activists" (p. 8). To my opinion, however, it would have been more productive and enlightening to devote a special issue of a popular Slovak journal to the themes discussed at the conference (such as *Zahraničná politika* or *OS*, to mention just the two), instead of investing in an entire book in English, published internationally by an unknown publisher.

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