

A WORD FROM THE EDITOR

The last few years have seen a tremendous boom in studies of the state within the fields of sociology and political science. Using the state as a central concept, scholars have developed categories to explain its role in social, economic and political change. Unsuccessful transformations in post-communist Europe have come increasingly to be blamed on the incapacity of states to enforce the basic rules of the new political and economic orders. The maladroit attempt to solve the crisis of the Chechen hostages, in Fall 2002, is a perfect example of how states like Russia have retained considerable 'despotic' power, but can still clearly be described as weak in 'infrastructural' power, to use Michael Mann's terms. Russia's power was sufficient to eliminate the terrorists, but fell short of containing collateral damage to its own citizens. 'Infrastructural', rather than 'despotic', power is what the state must mobilize to ensure the success of a transformation.

The term 'weak state' is a powerful one in the current literature on post-communist Europe. However, it was never explicitly defined because it was assumed that analytically, but also practically, the meaning of the term was obvious. It is enough to find bad roads, electricity outages, or public servants queuing for their previous year's salary, to determine that a state is weaker than it was, and weaker than it should be.

In current analyses of Eastern Europe, however, there are at least three different ways to conceptualize state weakness. The strength of the state can be measured in terms of capabilities - where a state's strength is defined as its capability to implement a policy vision, to penetrate society, to regulate, and so on. In this view, a strong state is able to collect taxes and a weak state fails to do so. It is in this 'increasing capabilities' sense that most leaders in the South Eastern European region see a need to strengthen the state. But a state can be efficient at revenue-collection and still a total failure at service-delivery. Therefore, the second measure for assessing a state's strength is the perception of the consumers of the

public goods provided by the state. Is the state capable of providing rule of law? Does it protect and enforce human and property rights? Finally, the third approach to state assessment defines a weak state as a 'captured state' - a state in which particular group interests dominate the policy-making process, illicitly shaping the rules of the game. A state can be captured by oligarchs or predatory elites, by businesses or negative social capital networks of all kinds. In this approach, an analysis must differentiate between the formal and declared projects of a state - e.g. European integration and the actual project of political elites, which can in fact be rent-seeking, state capture, etc.

Many countries in the FSU and the Balkans can be described as weak states in terms of capacity, delivery, and capture. More often than not we find societies and states coexisting alongside one another rather than sharing a common existence. Government in societies in which informal practices and unwritten rules are stronger than constitutions and laws illustrates the formula: 'we pretend to govern, they pretend to follow'. Given such an environment, it is debatable whether the same type of conditionality that worked for the first wave of countries to join the European Union - 'enlargement as usual' - could work in South Eastern Europe.

Balkan societies are not unique in this respect. Former Soviet Union countries suffer, to an even greater extent, from the same model of state weakness. What accounts for the significant differences in performance across Eastern Europe? Why did some new states consolidate and gain legitimacy - such as the Baltics - while others are bordering on state failure - as in Moldova and Macedonia? Why did the incentive of European integration work better for Lithuania than for Bulgaria? Are there any best practices for overcoming state weakness that can be reproduced across Eastern Europe? Which institutions do, in fact, work?