

Maria Snegovaya. *When Left Moves Right: The Decline of the Left and the Decline of the Right in Postcommunist Europe*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2024 £19.99 (pbk), xii + 300pp. ISBN 978-0-19-769903-04

The collapse of the social democratic centre-left in Eastern Europe is a critical yet under-explored aspect of recent European politics. It echoes the crisis of social democracy in Western Europe and promises insights into why once successful post-communist democracies are now leading in populism and democratic backsliding.

Maria Snegovaya argues that this decline shares common causes with the well-documented erosion of West European social democracy. She attributes it to the centre-left's adoption of neoliberal economics, which alienated its traditional working-class base and created opportunities for radical right populists to gain support using welfare chauvinist appeals. Snegovaya posits that the pro-market reforms in post-1989 Eastern Europe mirrored the market-friendly modernisation of Western Europe, resulting in similar political effects. Indeed, she suggests, these effects were potentially more pronounced in Eastern Europe due to its larger traditional working class.

Snegovaya's book examines centre-left parties in the four Visegrad states: Poland, Hungary, Czechia, and Slovakia. Here, she contrasts the collapse of technocratic, pro-reform ex-communists in Hungary and Poland with the sustained electoral appeal of Czech and Slovak centre-left parties which maintained more redistributive economic policies. These left parties managed to retain their working-class constituencies, blocking the rise of the populist radical right.

Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, Snegovaya demonstrates that East European working class voters, like their Western counterparts, prefer economic redistribution and cultural conservatism (understood in the book largely as opposition to immigration). She finds that the more pro-market left-wing parties in Eastern Europe tended to lose working-class support in proportion to their pro-market stances. However, due to limited data, it is unclear how much post-communist social democrats suffered by shifting towards pro-market policies and to what extent they were initially insulated from electoral backlash by EU accession conditionalities and fiscal constraints imposed by international organisations.

Snegovaya also tracks patterns of electoral support across these countries, finding here too that parties' class support correlated with their stance on left-right distributional issues. This pattern applies to both left parties and their populist radical right challengers. Variations also align with the introduction of austerity measures introduced by centred centre-left government, which Snegovaya identifies - focusing on sequencing - as having a more significant impact than corruption and governance scandals. A 2018 survey experiment in Hungary supports her findings, showing that working-class voters lean towards the radical right when left economic appeals are emphasised over cultural conservatism and nativism.

Snegovaya is a 'lumper' rather than 'splitter' as far as East-West differences are concerned and, unlike many authors, is upfront in arguing that frameworks developed in the West European context can and do make sense when applied to the East European experience. Her book is empirically solid and makes an important contribution in highlighting the collapse of the East European centre-left in countries where it once strongest as a crucial issue for research. The book makes the important point that political scientists, and not just

anthropologists and sociologists, should recalibrate their thinking about populism and democracy in terms of class and distributional conflict, not just culture and ideology.

However, aspects of the book's analysis do not fully convince. The claim that the decline of West European social democracy results from radical right capture of the working class (or vice versa) is contested in the literature and requires more careful consideration. Deeper engagement with the research on the evolution of social democracy in Western Europe would also have been beneficial. By the 1980s, West European social democratic parties had already moved towards left-liberal appeals, mixing culture and economics, under the pressure of socio-economic and demographic change and value shift. Key literature on Eastern Europe is also neglected. As Kitschelt et al famously suggested, post-1989 competition in Hungary and Poland was shaped by legacies which made culture and identity, rather than economics initially more salient. Here, conservatives were market-sceptic and post-communist leftists technocratic and reform-minded from the outset.

Moreover, while Snegovaya's empirical analyses are valid, using the political language of Western Europe to describe Eastern Europe stretches concepts severely and glosses over qualitative differences between regions. The wholesale transformation of command economies in Eastern Europe was vastly different from Thatcherite reform of Keynesian welfare capitalism - perhaps too to subsume under the label 'neo-liberal reforms' or 'pro-market economic policies'. In post-1989 Eastern Europe – *all* relevant parties from far-right to far-left were 'pro-market' as they favoured creating a market economy in some form. Similarly, shifts within one-two electoral cycles in a highly volatile electorate without well-established party loyalties is not 're-alignment' in the West European sense. Nor, despite the

existence of a 'regime divide', can hastily reconfigured post-communist successor parties be easily equated with West European social democratic groupings as 'traditional left parties'.

Awkward too is the insistence, despite caveats and qualifications, on the importance of one causal variable to the near exclusion of others: class-based voting and party positioning on left-right distributional issues. The book invests considerable energy setting aside other explanations: socio-cultural conservative backlash, public frustration with the corruption of established parties or post-communist electoral volatility. Such critiques are valid to an extent but are not always backed by strong causal arguments. As Snegovaya's conclusion hints, analysing causes as complex, complementary and inter-linked - relating economic losses to, say, cultural disempowerment or frustration over corruption to economic grievances - could provide deeper insights.

Finally, as is acknowledged for the Czech case in a long footnote (p.164), sticking to left-wing economic appeals staved off the demise of Czech and Slovak social democracy for only for a few years. The Czech Social Democrats were marginalized in 2017 by Andrej Babiš's 'technocratic populism,' which combined left economic appeals with claims of efficiency and strong leadership. In Slovakia, Robert Fico's Smer party has remained politically buoyant but transformed into a functional equivalent of a radical right party. Both, like their pro-market counterparts in Hungary and Poland, seem to represent different but equally failed recipes for the centre-left.

Overall, *When Left Moves Right* thus raises more questions than it answers with both its diagnosis of centre-left decline and prescription of keeping economically left seeming at best partial.

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