

Andrey A. Meleshevich, *Party Systems in Post-Soviet Countries: A Comparative Study of Political Institutionalization in the Baltic States, Russia, and Ukraine*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. £42.50 hbk, xvi + 262 pp. ISBN 1 4039 7449 7.

Political parties are present in all democracies and the conviction that they are necessary for the smooth working of representative democracy is widespread. They also seem to be instrumental in attaining democracy in the first place. Why do some democratising countries develop institutionalised party systems while others fail to do so? That is the fundamental question addressed in Andrey Meleshevich's book on post-Soviet party systems.

Meleshevich focuses on two dimensions of party system institutionalisation – autonomy and stability. *Autonomy* refers to the independence of party system from other social institutions and external environment. It is operationalised by the degree of partisan bias in executive and legislative recruitment and uniformity of parties' electoral support across regions. *Stability* refers to regularity in parties' patterns of interaction, measured by the level of electoral volatility and new parties' vote share.

The author argues that four factors are crucial for party system institutionalisation. First, the early toleration of opposition parties by communist elites legitimised competitive parties as political actors and allowed them more time to organise. Second, the extent of presidential power and its independence of the legislature obstruct party institutionalisation. Third, electoral rules matter, sometimes in ways that contradict common arguments in electoral systems literature. Finally, the development of parties of power strikes the final blow to party system institutionalisation.

The book is generally well researched and provides a wealth of information on the five countries covered. There are only a few factual mistakes – an achievement, as these are difficult to avoid in cross-country studies. The choice of countries may raise some eyebrows. The three Baltic countries are usually considered to be as democratic as any other new EU member state; Ukraine is at best considered to be a promising new democracy; Russia is at worst believed to have developed into a stable non-democracy. On one hand, Meleshevich has a case for “most similar systems” design – only two decades ago the countries shared the Soviet political system. However, in these cases “already two decades” might be more appropriate an expression as the countries have followed very different paths ever since 1988. The set of countries may not be well suited for most similar system research design. If one was interested in levels of democracy, greater variation could be achieved by including Belarus or any other less democratic post-Soviet country. If we focus on the issue of party institutionalisation, we should better exclude non-democracies as the lack of democracy itself may be the decisive factor. For example, does it matter how much electoral change there is or whether cabinet ministers are members of a party (or *the* party), if the executive power is ultimately vested in a powerful non-partisan president? Bringing in some of the democracies in Central and Eastern Europe would have benefited the study – they were initially similar enough to the Soviet Union to allow for the most similar systems research.

Questioning case selection may fail to do full justice to the informed analysis the book presents. Case selection often diverges from textbook principles and is mediated by other considerations – author’s familiarity with particular countries, availability of funding and local colleagues to bother with questions etc. If one has to choose between a research that is methodologically perfect but ill-informed and one that is well-informed with slight methodological flaws, the latter should be preferred with little hesitation. Unfortunately, Meleshevich’s argument is clearly weakened by his selection of cases. It is a risky strategy to study the effect of four explanatory variables by looking at only five cases. As it happens, in this study the explanatory factors go together almost all the way. With some simplification one can say that in the Baltic countries opposition was tolerated early on, a parliamentary system and proportional electoral rules were chosen, and parties of power failed to materialise. In Russia and Ukraine, the opposite was true on all four accounts. Alas, it is difficult to tell which of the factors was decisive for greater institutionalisation in the Baltics and impossible to say whether the system of government, electoral rules or absence of party of power had any effect *after* the early toleration of opposition. Also, it can be argued that the explanatory variables have been strongly interlinked.

The first part of the book measures institutionalisation in a straightforward and acceptable manner even though one wonders whether the share of non-partisan cabinet members is a direct result of having a non-partisan president and whether the indices of stability are always correct. Also, “‘old’ parties’ volatility index” is a fairly perplexing term for the vote share of parties with earlier electoral experience. The latter is an instance of a wider problem – the language is somewhat dense throughout the book. The second part of the study analyses explanatory variables. The discussion on first steps of political liberalisation is highly informative, as is the analysis of Russian and Ukrainian parties of power. Meleshevich also points out that majoritarian and proportional electoral systems can lead to outcomes different from the common knowledge about electoral systems. The failure of single mandate districts to help party system consolidation – unorthodox if not entirely novel argument – is highlighted by rich empirical evidence. The book also provides a commendable analysis of auxiliary aspects of electoral systems that are often overlooked – such as rules concerning electoral coalitions and candidate registration. The conclusion includes a welcome advice to institutional designers. The ones democratically minded have a lot to learn from Meleshevich’s recommendations. However, some imply that institutions are created by gods or angels. Real politicians have more egoistic objectives than the common good of setting up a perfect democracy. It may be difficult for elites in authoritarian countries to take the advice to give up power early. It can also be difficult to resist the temptation to establish a party of power if someone with weak democratic credentials faces the opportunity. Good institutions may decrease the risk that such leaders or opportunities arise, but the initial odds may make the ears of designers deaf to the sound words of advice.