



Local Communities and Post-Communist Transformation: Czechoslovakia, the Czech Republic and Slovakia by Simon Smith

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on the political process without the aid of the mass media' (p. 183). This is a good point with regard to Russia where Internet use remains low but somewhat misleading when applied to the US. Nevertheless, he sees an important role for the Internet in Russia: 'Combining the role of *samizdat* with a social communications industry, the Net is perhaps required by a vocal minority than by a silent majority. But in some cases (the war in Chechnya), this is already very important, since it leaves a window of freedom in the communications system' (p. 184).

The book's only serious shortcoming is the failure to discuss in any detail the main pieces of primary and secondary media legislation, which were enacted throughout the 1990s: *The Mass Media Law* (1992); *The Secrecy Law* (1993); *The Reporting Law* (1994); *The Information Law* (1995); *The Communications Law* (1995); *The Law of Information Exchange* (1996). Some knowledge of this legislation is critical to understanding what took place in the Russian media in the 1990s. The author makes a couple of references to *The Mass Media Law* but this is inadequate given the book's theme, especially as interpreting *The Mass Media Law* was one of the main problems in media disputes in the 1990s. Indeed, one reason why the image of a more competent Russia in the second Chechen war was possible was because information flows were far more tightly controlled by the various ministries. What does this mean for press and media freedoms generally? Nor is there any discussion of the Judicial Chamber, an early attempt to deal with complaints and grievances arising from press coverage.

Overall, however, this is a useful study of the Russian media which covers a critical period and explains many of the problems confronting journalists, legislators, politicians and, indeed, academics, as they try to adapt to the frustrations and hopes of post-Soviet Russia.

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Smith, Simon (ed.). *Local Communities and Post-Communist Transformation: Czechoslovakia, the Czech Republic and Slovakia*. BASEES RoutledgeCurzon Series on Russian and East European Studies, 3. RoutledgeCurzon, London and New York, 2003. Tables. Notes. Index. xxiv + 223 pp. £60.00.

As this new collection highlights, extrication from Communist rule in Central and Eastern Europe encompassed not merely national 'modes of transition', but a myriad of local transitions. This is particularly true in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, where patterns of settlement, pre-Communist traditions of public administration and Communist ultra-centralism made the restoration of the self-governing commune/community (*obec*) one of the key ideals of the November 1989 'Velvet Revolution'.

With the exception of Martin Myant's chapter, which surveys the national-level relationship between parties and civil society in the Czech Republic, the book's contributors all examine this neglected dimension of transformation through detailed local case studies. Simon Smith explores the legacies of the civic movements of 1989, studying Public Against Violence across the

Humenné district of East Slovakia and Civic Forum in five Czech communities in West Bohemia. Similarly, Mikuláš Huba examines the transformation of the Slovak Union of Nature and Landscape Conservationists (SZOPK) from an island of alternative thinking within official structures before 1989 to a diverse set of successor NGOs in the post-Mečiar era. Like many of the socially engaged Czech and Slovak sociologists in late Communist Czechoslovakia whose work he explores in the introduction, Smith sees local civic mobilization as pre-figuring radical forms of community self-determination outside the reach of bureaucratic state administration and conventional party politics. In practice, however, as his and others' contributions make clear, factional infighting, the dominance of networks of local notables, small scale clientelism and passive, disengaged local populations have been more common outcomes. However, there are local success stories. The conditions facilitating these more positive patterns of civic engagement, he suggests, include collaboration between 'old' (Communist-era) and 'new' organizations; strong local identities, which enable the 'narrativization' of post-Communist transformation at grassroots level; and the presence of clear external threats to the community. Such factors are formalized in Martin Slosiarnik's notion of 'civic potential' developed in a comparative analysis of two Slovak communities which, although similar in terms of demographics and socio-economic structure, have had contrasting success in local transformation. Elsewhere, Zdenka Vajdová's review of ten years of local transformation in the Czech Republic presents these factors in more familiar terms of social and human capital. As Imrich Vašíčka emphasizes in a study of localities in East Slovakia, 'external threats' to community life are generated not just by residual centralism in state administration and economic management, but also by the impact of marketization. As dominant local employers engaged in primary and manufacturing industries closed down, unemployment raised new challenges of economic regeneration, fund-raising and (given the large Roma minorities in the region) inter-ethnic relations. Parallel chapters on enterprise-level transformation in the Czech and Slovak electronics industries, authored respectively by Aleš Kroupa and Zdenka Mansfeldová, and Monika Čambáliková, confirm the importance of broader global and European factors in local experiences.

Perhaps the freshest thinking in the book, despite some sometimes opaque social theory jargon, is to be found in Simon Smith's introduction and conclusion. Smith argues that modernization, conceived as a shift towards the 'late modernity' of West European societies, is a better key to understanding post-Communist societies than either institutionally-led 'transition' perspectives or notions of path dependent 'transformation' which stress legacies from the Communist past. Although in most chapters, the forces of (post-) modernization, variously taking the form of foreign owners, market forces, ecological activists or European NGO networks, remain largely off stage, this undoubtedly represents a promising research agenda. More problematic, perhaps, is the book's marked sociological bias, visible in a tendency to view political institutions as epiphenomenal to deeper socio-cultural practices. Similarly, both Smith and the 'activist' sociology he draws on — although not, it must be said, his current Czech and Slovak co-contributors — seem

curiously unprepared for the re-emergence of social interests and partisan politics at local level. Both are depicted primarily as pathological impediments to community modernization. Here, a more critical view of the culturally-embedded Czech and Slovak views of the *obec* as an autonomous organic community beyond politics might have yielded further insights.

Overall, however, *Local Communities and Post-Communist Transformation* represents a set of solid empirical research findings, enlivened by Simon Smith's more wide-ranging ideas, which will be of interest to specialists on the Czech Republic and Slovakia, local politics and micro-economic transformation.

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Todorova, Maria (ed.). *Balkan Identities: Nation and Memory*. Hurst & Company, London, 2004. x + 374 pp. Notes. Index. £45.00; £17.50.

WHEN he looks towards the past, Walter Benjamin's angel of history sees only 'a single catastrophe', not a 'chain of events'. Few metaphors, one is tempted to argue, epitomize more forcefully the dominant perceptions of the Balkan past. In fact, views of an unchanging past of unremitting horror have become so entrenched, that even the name 'Balkan' is being forced out, as Balkan states (and scholars) increasingly seek refuge under the more convenient roof of 'Central' or 'Southeastern Europe'. It would appear that even the Balkans wish to escape from themselves. In her introduction to this impressive collection of studies, Maria Todorova acknowledges that 'the guiding principle' behind this volume is an 'attempt to normalise the Balkans [...] in the scholarly field' (p. 17). She is eminently qualified to preside over such an undertaking, for her own seminal work *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford, 1997) has gone a long way in analysing the construction of the Balkans by the Western imagination. The task itself is daunting enough, and encounters serious obstacles: Balkan studies are largely fragmented, and locked into ethnocentric narratives that leave little room for comparative approaches, while few specialists would master the necessary languages and vast secondary literatures of adjacent fields that would allow for an interdisciplinary analysis.

Balkan Identities is a highly competent attempt to redress many of these imbalances. Its main aim is to explore the local and national politics of memory and the mechanisms that construct, celebrate, internalize and diffuse it. This is an important subject for, although all nations dream, the Balkans have mostly nightmares. The book, product of a conference sponsored by the Centre for Democracy and Reconciliation in (predictably?) South-Eastern Europe, brings together sixteen contributions from historians, anthropologists and literary scholars, structured around three parts. The first deals with the social production of memories and national identities, and includes perceptions of the past by individuals and diasporic communities (Leyla Neyzi on an Alevi-Kurdish girl from eastern Turkey, and Nergis Canefe on Turkish-Cypriot's perception of their past); the central role of the Kosovo epic in the moulding of Serbian nationalism (sensitively discussed by Milica Bakić-Hayden); the 'ambivalence' which Shannan Peckham detects in the attitude