

*Governing the Czech Republic and Slovakia: Between State Socialism and the European Union* by John A. Scherpereel, Boulder and London, FirstForum Press, 2009, 263 pp., index, £ 58 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-935049-01-2,

Despite its title John A. Scherpereel's book, in fact, focuses on the politics of two aspects of reforming the post-communist state in the Czech Republic and Slovakia: the development of self-governing regions and the creation of neutral professionalized civil services. These two elements of state transformation, Scherpereel argues, are crucial to democratization as they touch on both the legitimacy and efficiency of democratic decision-making and ability of newly democratic states to deliver agreed public goods.

The book largely consists of four substantive chapters. An opening historical review on 'socialist state building' chronicles Czechoslovakia's communist regime's parallel policies, administrative centralization and elimination of Austro-Hungarian and interwar traditions of bureaucratic independence. The book then examines the transitional politics of decentralization, regionalization and civil service reform in Czechoslovakia during the early 1990s, during the immediate aftermath of the fall of communism, focusing in particular on the 'bottom-up' emergence of new actors such as the national lobby organizations of newly autonomous municipalities and the short-lived Moravian regionalist movement in the Czech Republic. A third chapter considers how reforms were further pursued (or more often, not pursued) by politicians in Slovakia and the Czech Republic following the division of Czechoslovakia in 1992 and the emergence of more stable, regularized party politics. The fourth substantive chapter traces the role of the European Union (EU) in promoting regionalization and civil service reform in the Czech Republic and Slovakia during their accession to the Union, exploring how reforms of the state became a newly important part of the EU *acquis* presented to candidate states; how the European Commission worked to influence Czech and Slovak domestic politics in these areas; and how Czech and Slovak political actors responded by harnessing EU conditionalities for use in their own struggles. A concluding chapter reviews the book's findings and briefly compares them with Poland and Hungary.

*Governing the Czech Republic and Slovakia* is an impeccably researched study which makes use of a wide range of Czech, Slovak and English language sources including official documents, records of parliamentary debates and media reports. As such, it provides an empirically rich, nuanced and clearly written account of the politics of state reform in the Czech and Slovak republics, taking in episodes many less well researched studies ignore or overlook such as the politics of Moravian regionalism. Its careful unpacking of events also brings the contours of more familiar processes such as interaction between the EU and the then candidate states into sharper focus.

The book's excellent scholarship is, however, undermined by a somewhat disjointed structure and lack of intellectual focus. The 40-page second chapter on the history of sub-national governance and civil service structures in the Czech lands and Slovakia since 1918, for example, offers an informative narrative. However, it seems overlong and unnecessary given that the key historical legacies highlighted in later chapters stem from the short-lived 'Prague Spring' reform era of the 1960s. Equally

problematic is the lack of a clear focused research design. It is thus unclear why – beyond their similar institutional and political points of departure in 1989 – the Czech Republic and Slovakia are selected as comparative cases, nor what specific hypotheses about institutional change the author is seeking prove or disprove. The book's discussion certainly ranges over many of the usual causal suspects: if and how historical legacies matter, the use of inherited network resources, the role of ideology and party politics and finally EU leverage. Despite the discussion of Polish and Hungarian cases in the introduction and conclusion, ultimately, explanation is not sufficiently disentangled from case study descriptions to offer the reader a clear, cogent general account of how history, resources and EU conditionalities came together to effect institutional change in the region.

To a considerable extent, such problems arise from the book's failure to engage sufficiently with the relevant theoretical and comparative literatures on political and institutional change in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Key works such as Grzymała-Busse's book on party competition and state reform in the region, Vachudova's work on EU leverage in CEE or Hughes, Sasse and Gordon's work on CEE regionalization and the EU conditionality are mentioned in passing, but their arguments, interpretations and findings are largely ignored. Accordingly, the book's reported findings are a slightly incongruous mix of the commonplace reconfirmation of earlier findings with (a few) genuinely arresting new insights. Few scholars, for example, will be surprised to read that, other things being equal, network resources inherited from the communist period confer political advantage; that actors recombined resources through a process of 'bricolage'; that after 1989 elected leaders such as Václav Klaus in the Czech Republic and Vladimír Mečiar in Slovakia blocked decentralization and civil service reform from a mixture of ideological commitment to centralized states and short-term party self-interest; or that the EU's conditionalities become clearer and more explicit after 1997 when Eastern enlargement was launched in earnest; or that in the late 1990s Czech and Slovak politicians of all shades exploited the EU pre-accession programmes and conditionalities as a source of arguments and opportunities to talk down or outflank opponents.

Other findings break genuinely new ground. In foregrounding the role of local and regional actors shaped by the short-lived liberalization of the 1960s, the book provides a valuable corrective to the predominant stress in the literature on parties and party competition as key determinants of CEE state reform. Similarly, it perceptively highlights how the European Commission in most instances influenced the pace, but not necessarily the content of state reforms (largely fought out by domestic actors, albeit under EU-inspired time pressures), offering avenues for developing the stalled debate about EU leverage on CEE during the accession period.

Frustratingly, however, the theoretical and comparative potential of such insights goes generally unrecognized and undeveloped and they are largely subsumed by less interesting general discussion. Overall *Governing the Czech Republic and Slovakia* is an impressively researched study that enriches the case study literature on the two states, but one that disappointingly fails to contribute effectively to broader comparative and theoretical debates.

Sean Hanley