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Book Review:

The EU's Impact on Identity Formation in East-Central Europe between 2004 and 2013: Perceptions of the Nation and Europe in Political Parties of the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia

Ruth Ferrero-Turrión*

The EU's Impact on Identity Formation in East-Central Europe between 2004 and 2013: Perceptions of the Nation and Europe in Political Parties of the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia by Michal Vít, 2020, Ibidem-Verlag.

Drastic changes in the European political system have taken place over the last two decades. In Western Europe, the traditional conformation to a solid centre-right and centre-left political force as the axes of most political systems in place since the end of the Second World War started to be dismantled. To cite only a few examples, in France, Socialists and Republicans lost nearly all historic and electoral relevance, while in Greece, the Socialist party, PASOK, has disappeared. Meanwhile in Spain, the two-party dominant system has been replaced by a new two-block system. The disappearance of traditional parties combined with the rise of new political parties proposing alternatives to economy, migration, and other crises that have occurred since 2008 and the lack of a unified narrative from the EU leadership has opened a Pandora's box on the role and goals that the political parties should have in our societies.

In contrast to Western European countries, Michael Vít's book looks at political party development and evolution from the perspective of East-Central European countries. Each has undergone major changes in their political systems during the 1990s, establishing democratic models and consolidating their political systems. While this period has been researched widely by scholars focused on transition and consolidation of democratic political systems, Vít's book, based on his PhD research, approaches precisely the second phase of political system development, following EU accession. Consequently, he focuses on a period that is less studied, examining the impact of the economic crisis on the EU with a special focus on the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia. The goal of his research is to provide context and answers to questions that have been present in the study of the formation of systems within political parties in East-Central Europe. There is a specific emphasis placed on the links between how political parties have evolved in their visions and perceptions of national identity through progressive socialisation into the European arena. Questions he focuses on include: How does the international terrain affect the way in which individual parties envision national identity? How does EU membership affect the formation of national identity? Why did certain parties change their views on national identity while others did not?

The book has the traditional structure of a dissertation. The author introduces the European political space and the interactions among political parties, while conceptualising national identity and its impact on political party manifestos and political goals. He creates a research framework that examines how national identity and political parties are interconnected and influence one another. The methodological chapter addresses quantitative and qualitative methods used to process the data set from a constructivist framework. He states the main goal of this work "is not to generate theory, but to propose an analytical tool for researching how political parties shape our understanding of national identity" (p. 68). He relies on the Deductive Manifesto Project Methodology and a grounded theory approach, which allows him to "set the framework for analysing the perception and framing strategies of political parties as well as elements influencing

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the main data source, such as election manifestos” (pp. 188). The methodological chapter with a focus on this mixed methods approach is helpful in better understanding his motivations and serves as an introduction to the research framework.

In the empirical chapters, Vit analyses the evolution of changes introduced in the election manifestos of the political parties with parliamentary representation. He measures the changes codifying positive and negative items for nationalism on a comparative basis. Furthermore, he also approaches the different interactions held by the political parties analysed in the European political space, thus offering analysis on multiple levels.

Therefore, he focuses on one hand on the Europeanisation processes in the institutional political arena, as well as the development of the political parties and their respective approaches to national identity on the other. The comparative approach allows him to outline the peculiarities in each country case. For example, he demonstrates how the Law and Justice Party (PiS) in Poland has been able to play a role in the European political sphere within their political family, while refusing not only to get more involved in the integration process, but rather also questioning it. The author affirms in this point that “the European Political space may be understood as helping the political party to create an opposition against undesirable external influences” (pp. 184). And when this is happening, the political party pushes to create an alternative European political space. This juxtaposition between belonging to political families and joint initiatives vs. pursuing national level policies by individual parties is demonstrated in each of the cases. This kind of work could, for example, be expanded upon in further research using the Hungarian FIDESZ party.

This book undoubtedly introduces, in a comprehensible way, a more efficient approach to researching identity cleavage in individual party systems on a theoretical level, while providing empirical analysis of the East-Central political systems. The methodological sophistication used to analyse the large number of documents and develop the code book demonstrates a real advance and serves as a testament to how the grounded theory approach has the potential to generate new theoretical insights. Still, it is important to note that since the research is only limited to political manifestos, the reader is left wondering about the influence of other variables that could be of importance, such as internal discussions within the political parties or leadership options, etc. These dynamics should be explored in future work.

Amidst the ongoing rise of populist politics, this book provides a timely and substantial advance in the study of political party systems in East-Central Europe, giving the reader a better understanding of the breakthrough of more nationalist parties as systemic parties, their evolution, and pragmatism in gaining power and popularity. Its major contribution is in its ability to demonstrate that the Europeanization process can be used in multiple ways and to demonstrate these paths within East-Central Europe comparatively while developing the potential for further comparison down the road. On one hand, political parties aim towards more integration within the European families of political parties, while on the other, they build on alternative proposals within the EU context that forward their specific agendas and are sometimes in conflict with larger EU processes.

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