

Wiatr, Jerzy J.:

*Europa pokomunistyczna. Przemiany państw
i społeczeństw po 1989 roku*

*(Post-Communist Europe. Transformation of
Countries and Societies after 1989)*

Warszawa: Wydawnictwo naukowe Scholar, 2006, 368 pp. ISBN 83-7383-207-6.

Reviewed by Lukáš Vomlela

Jerzy Wiatr's study offers an analysis of various phenomena that provoked or attended the transition from the communist to a democratic system. On their basis the author strives to determine and explain similarities and differences among political systems in the post-communist countries under study. Historical factors, which are considered to be rudimentary, play an important role even as the author rejects historical determinism. He explores three contingent influences. The first is the influence of the historical legacy of the period prior to the rise of communist regimes. The author studies former democratic traditions and their influence on the subsequent building of democratic institutions and society's transformation. Another important aspect is the way in which the regime was established, and the last presents events related to the crumbling of the old regimes and their influence on the new ones. The

author defines five types — negotiated system reform, capitulation and transfer of rule, revolution, reform without negotiation, and disintegration of the federal state. Changes occur based on interactions of players who are hard-liners, conservatives, reformers among the ruling elites, and mild and radical streams among the opposition.

The work deals with other aspects, as well. The author compares the process of disintegration or division of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. He claims that in these cases people's identification with the state is vital for the preservation of multinational states whereas identification with one's national group is secondary. J. Wiatr adds that the communist system is not capable of creating conditions under which this identification could be strong. The next part of the study highlights the importance of the choice of a proper political system for the

new democracies. In the section dealing with economic changes the author remarks that post-communist voters considered their governments responsible for the negative impact of the transformation in the first years of the transformation and this affected the popularity of the governments. In countries where economic changes occurred quickly, the polarisation of society may have been too fast as a result of the changing socio-economic conditions. This created major tensions in the society. In some countries the reforms also helped to create powerful oligarchies, which present a danger for democratisation of societies. The author identifies four types of cleavages: nationalist, economic, cultural and post-communist. The cultural cleavage does not, according to the author, entail only religion but all values a given society endorses. The post-communist cleavage expresses the attitude of various segments of the population toward the former regime.

J. Wiatr further deals with the influence of political systems on society's democratisation. He states that systems with a stronger parliament have transited to democracy more easily than those where the position of the president is strong; and he further analyses the actions of political parties as well as the influence of electoral systems and voter behaviour in individual post-communist countries. The book addresses the influence of power bodies such as the parliament, the president and the prime minister. In this section emphasis is placed on *leadership*, which the author uses to explain some developments in post-communist countries based on the selected strategy and leadership abilities of individual political actors. For this purpose the author devises a typology of leadership types: re-

formers, nation state builders, and counter-reformers slowing down or halting the process of democratisation. There are also moral authorities (political representatives enjoying high moral credit in society) and successors building on their predecessors. The author stresses that the topic of political leadership is under-studied and under-theorised in contemporary literature. If more research attention were paid to leadership, it could help to elucidate other phenomena.

J. Wiatr deals with local elites. His analysis contains valuable findings from earlier studies to which he has contributed.¹ It includes an analysis of attitudes of local elites not only during the period of Communism and afterward as the research continued to map the attitudes of local elites during transition. Based on empirical data he studies and compares attitudes toward democratic changes among local political elites. The research suggests that the democratic changes enjoy major support in countries of Central Europe. In the Baltic States this support is lower; and it is the lowest in countries of Central Asia. The last two sections of the book address dilemmas facing post-communist countries; one maps social issues in the countries under study and the other deals with the change in the foreign policy orientation after 1989.

If for nothing else, J. Wiatr's work can be recommended for the breadth of topics covered. It attempts to assess the influence of a number of various factors on the transition from Communism to democracy. It provides reflection of existing research and its expansion, and also points to issues that are not sufficiently addressed in existing literature that demand further attention. These, for example, include the issue of political lead-

ership. The study is also valuable because it strives to prove, where possible, individual hypotheses with concrete cases. It does not only address theoretical points of departure, but individual findings are applied to post-communist countries, are then compared and based on this the findings are refuted or confirmed.

The study is based on an empirical-analytical approach and starts from the assumption that the period since the fall of Communism in Eastern and Central Europe has provided us with a large amount of data

which can often help us to trace complex political processes in societies and try to explain them. J. Wiatr's study is also very valuable and can be recommended because of the analysis of the attitudes of local elites toward democratic changes. It builds on empirical data, which help us to understand better the social acceptance of changes in individual societies and outline further potential development. J. Wiatr also works with his previous research, which he has gradually expanded and updated.

Notes

- ¹ In 1966 a research study comparing local elites was carried out in India, Poland, Yugoslavia and the USA and was published in 1971. It was later expanded. At the beginning of the 1990s the study included Austria, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, Slovenia, Sweden, Ukraine and Hungary and was published in 1993. The study was expanded in the course of the 1990s and by 1998 a total of 15 post-communist countries was involved in the study. In 2002 the last study was published. The following publications present the research findings:

Philip, Jakob et al. (1971) *Values and the Active Community: A Crossnational Study of Local Leadership*. New York.

Ostrowski, Krzysztof and Henry Teune (1993) *Patterns of democratic leadership: Country comparisons*. In: *Democracy and Local Governance: Ten Empirical Studies*. Ed. Betty M. Jacob, Krzysztof Ostrowski and Henry Teune, pp. 7–25. Honolulu.

Ostrowski, Krzysztof (2002) *Polscy działacze na tle działaczy z indyjskich krajów*. In: *Władza lokalna po reformie samorządowej*, pp. 89–94. Ed. Jerzy J. Wiatr. Warszawa.