



Report on the published work of Andrew Roberts

In Volume 9 Issue number 3 (published in September 2011) of *Political Studies Review* (the review journal of the British Political Science Association) I published an article entitled 'Half Full But Also Half Empty: Conditionality, Compliance and the Quality of Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe'¹. I reviewed at length three books including *The Quality of Democracy in Eastern Europe: Public Preferences and Policy Reforms* written by Andrew Roberts. I include here the sections of my review which discussed his book:

The Quality of Democracy

In contrast to the rather bleak message stemming from Gallagher's book Andrew Roberts provides a more upbeat assessment of the CEE countries. Indeed, at the core of *The Quality of Democracy in Eastern Europe* is the argument that despite facing difficult economic circumstances and an unfavourable inheritance from communism, these countries rapidly constructed relatively high-quality democracies. Roberts does not suggest that these democracies are perfect, but rather seeks to highlight that they compare well to other more established democracies in Western Europe and beyond.

Roberts' book contains much which deserves praise. Firstly, and most significantly, he reminds us how far the ten Eastern European states in his sample (Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia) have travelled during the twenty years since the 1989 revolutions. Four decades of communist rule without anything approaching 'genuine political competition or public participation meant that the entire political life of these countries had to be created from scratch with few memories of anything other than dictatorship' (p. 3). Moreover, the

¹ <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1478-9302.2010.00220.x/abstract>

communist experience 'produced citizens characterized by apathy towards politics', feelings of helplessness and a 'distrust of their fellow citizens' (p. 13). In short, four decades of communism left a 'relatively poor soil from which democratic quality could grow' (p. 13). Secondly, Roberts helps to move the debate about democracy in CEE on from the discussions about transition and consolidation towards a more fruitful debate for the 21st century which assesses the quality of these democracies. Thirdly, to tackle such thorny issues as the quality of democracy he does not rely on just number-crunching large n statistical data or on thick description case study, but approaches the theme by blending together these methodologies. Although in consequence *The Quality of Democracy in Eastern Europe* feels a little disjointed in places, Roberts deserves credit for realizing the merits of not assuming that one single methodological super-club can provide a satisfactory answer by itself.

Central to democratic quality argues Roberts are the linkages which allow citizens to control and influence public policy; the stronger these linkages, the higher the level of democratic quality. Roberts identifies three such linkages: electoral accountability (the power to sanction incumbents), mandate responsiveness (citizens have the power to select new officials whose policy views or personal characteristics they prefer i.e. elections are not just sanctioning but also as selection mechanisms), and policy responsiveness (the public's preferences determine day-to-day policy decisions). His statistical analysis found 'politicians have usually been held accountable for performance at elections and responded to public opinion, but have been less consistent in presenting and following through on clear campaign promises' (p. 188).

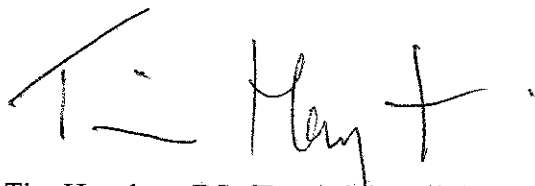
The choice of these particular measures will provoke debate. Roberts himself is aware of the limitations of these tools. His focus on electoral accountability, for instance, ignores horizontal accountability (the degree to which rulers accept limits on their power from other state institutions including other elected bodies and the courts) which by his own

admission is ‘important for the quality of governance in a democracy’ (p. 35) as the work of Kevin Deegan-Krause (2006) on Slovakia has shown or indeed the battles in 2009 between Czech politicians and the Constitutional Court over the calling of early elections. Moreover, ‘[o]ne of the dangers of accountability is that in fact that, because of its harsh verdict, politicians overreach themselves before elections’ (p. 36). Part of the disillusionment with politicians in CEE (and indeed elsewhere) lies in making inflated promises designed to garner support, but which are not delivered once in office. More broadly, although he claims there is a strong interest in politics on the part of citizens of post-communist democracies, is this a genuine interest in the content of policy debates or more a fascination with the soap opera of politics with its juicy scandals and tales of corruption?

Although Roberts makes a strong case for the relatively high level of democratic quality in Central and Eastern Europe which is a necessary corrective to the doom merchants and critics who suggest that the region has become unhinged or is dominated by populists (e.g. Rupnik, 2007), his conclusion that the glass is quite full strikes the informed observer as being too positive/upbeat. The democracy glass in CEE is half full and we should applaud the states for their progress in the past two decades, but we should not ignore their shortcomings. Roberts himself begins his book quoting the then Czech President Václav Havel’s December 1997 speech in which he lamented the state of democracy in his country, criticizing levels of corruption, the links between suspicious financial groups and politicians and the prevailing opinion in the state that it ‘pays off in this country to lie and to steal’ (p. 1); sentiments which seem as accurate today as when Havel uttered them. Moreover, although Roberts emphasizes the democratic qualities of electoral accountability and of mandate responsiveness, this ability to remove the unpopular from power merely reminds us that in CEE voting is frequently for the least worst option rather than a positive vote in favour of a party.

Apart from a few references to Vachudova (who admittedly produced the best written and most comprehensive book on the EU's role in shaping developments in CEE) the impact of the European Union is striking for its virtual absence from the discussion in Roberts' book. Although the development of democracy in the CEE states clearly benefited from the EU's encouragement, persuasion and threats to adhere to democratic principles and norms, the impact of the EU was not unambiguously positive for democratization. Indeed, due to the use of fast-tracking mechanisms to get *acquis*-related laws onto the statute book quickly during accession, the EU was hardly helping to foster adherence to procedures of good democratic governance (Sadurski, 2004). More broadly, as Raik (2004:591) argues, '[t]he keywords of the official discourse of enlargement/integration – inevitability, speed, efficiency, and expertise – formed a set of mutually reinforcing principles that all constrained democratic politics and tended to limit enlargement to a narrow sphere of elites and experts'. Indeed, the process of accession strengthened the executive at the expense of parliament. Whatever causal power one wishes to ascribe to the European Union, the very process of joining has altered the processes of decision-making within the CEE states making them 'more multilayered and multicentred' (Zielonka, 2007, p. 163).

The Quality of Democracy in Eastern Europe: Public Preferences and Policy Reforms is a significant contribution to the scholarly literature on the politics of Central and Eastern Europe. On the basis of my assessment of this book, I would support strongly the habilitation process of Andrew Roberts.



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