Transforming the Transformation? The East European Radical Right in the Political Process

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Since the 1980s, political scientists have been examining radical right parties and movements with an increasing intensity. They are mostly focused on the electoral outcomes, typically employing two types of explanations for societal and electoral support: demand-side approaches (an analysis of how changes in voters' attitudes affect the support for these parties [1]) and supply-side approaches (which examines how contextual and structural factors can facilitate or deter the radical right's electoral success [2]).

Minkenberg's work distinguishes itself from existing publications by taking on a different perspective. First, in contrast to most comparative studies of the radical right, it examines not only political parties and elections, but focuses on the dynamism they introduce to the political process. Second, the book contains a comparative approach to the study of the radical right in Eastern Europe, which generally receives less scholarly consideration in comparison to Western Europe.

The edited volume consists of fifteen chapters that are grouped into four parts. The first part is made up of two chapters grounding the book in its theoretical framework. The second part comprises four chapters, giving a broad overview of the current situation of radical right parties and movements in Central and Eastern Europe. The remaining two parts are dedicated to individual case studies: to the Visegrad Group countries, together with the Balkans and Ukraine, and in the final chapter Michael Minkenberg and Oliver Kossack provide a summary and comparative overview of their findings. The volume's structure is not innovative; the book predictably goes from methodical framework through general information and particular cases to conclusions. However, its conservative approach helps us understand the general idea of the book, and paints a clear picture of the radical right in this part of Europe.

In their chapter, Minkenberg and Kossack's goal is to scrutinize the role of Eastern European radical right parties and movements in the setting of national political agendas, their patterns, and the effects of their interactions, especially with regard to the context of the political climate in post-authoritarian countries. The authors also take a closer look at the significance of these parties, along with similar organizations and subcultures. They further
highlight the radical right's interaction with other political actors (e.g. parties, governments, interest groups, and movements) within and between Eastern European countries. Moreover, Minkenberg and Kossack underscore the effects of such interactions with regard to agenda-setting or policies in a particular policy field (p. 3).

Minkenberg's volume certainly achieves its goal in showing that "the maturation of democracies in Eastern Europe, along with their integration into the Western capitalist order and the European Union, did not lead to a withering away of ultranationalism in the region" (p. 348). Moreover, in most cases, the radical right was successful in setting its agenda along ethno-cultural cleavages. This has also contributed to political changes which run against the process of transformation towards liberal democracy. The eponymous "transforming the transformation" means that the authors ask whether radical right parties have gained enough influence and power to alter the ongoing transformation process in post-communist countries. They find an answer in the affirmative; contemporary political life in this part of Europe confirms that the question mark in the title is unnecessary. The radical right's increased influence has "transformed the transformation" in almost all analysed countries (except Lithuania). Most visibly of all, Hungary and Poland have moved from rule-of-law and liberal democracy standards towards an "illiberal democracy"[3], a term coined by Viktor Orbán. This kind of democracy is characterised by the absence of an independent judiciary and a lack of respect for minority rights. To a lesser degree, it can also be observed in Romania, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Estonia. After their first decade in the European Union, the newer member states have turned the transformation process around in a direction more favourable to the interest of the radical right. Therefore, in their conclusions, Minkenberg and Kossack say that the radical right was a transformative force without having any direct share in their respective governments. In their words, "the radical right's anti-systemic course and the context of young democratic regimes with under-institutionalized party systems and unresolved ethnic cleavages continue to present a radical challenge to the process of democratization" (p. 357).

The first observation after reading this book is that since it was published, the political situation in Eastern Europe has changed dramatically. The opinion held by Cas Mudde that "racist extremist parties are not really a major political force in Central and Eastern Europe, they look somewhat pathetic: (far) more extremist, but (far) less successful"[4] was a popular one in the previous decade. It is surprising, though, that this opinion is reiterated in Minkenberg's volume (e.g. pp. 34-37, 151 f., 157, 220, 227). In the period covered by the case studies, radical right parties neither occupied seats in the legislature, nor gained any in the latest elections. If we compare this situation with the present day, we can see how the political situation has changed in the Visegrad states, the Baltics, the Eastern Balkans and Ukraine. There, radical right parties and movements are not only in the legislature, but often have direct or indirect influence on policies. Moreover, mainstream parties have begun to co-opt the radical right's political agenda. That betokens that radical right attitudes are no longer vestigial, but are becoming a fixture in the political mainstream.

Therefore, the most important value of this book is to show how fast this process took course in Eastern Europe, and to explain why and how that has happened. The authors surmise that radical right parties and movements were very successful in agenda setting, although they had little-to-no representation in legislatures (e.g. pp. 74,
Radical right attitudes towards minorities (e.g. the "Roma issue"), migrants, and corruption have been co-opted by mainstream politicians, mainly because the radical right was able to mobilise substantial political support (p. 352). There are two obvious effects of this strategy: In some countries, mainstream parties have taken the place of their far-right competitors (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość in Poland; Fidesz in Hungary). In others, the "capture agenda strategy" has moved the whole political scene and the public opinion to the far right, and therefore has increased societal support for radical parties (Svoboda a přímá demokracie in the Czech Republic; Slovenská národná strana and Ľudová strana - Naše Slovensko in Slovakia; Obedineni patrioti in Bulgaria).

In assessing the substantial values of Minkenberg's book, it is necessary to acknowledge its weaknesses, however typical they might be for a written work of this scope. Most of all, the merits of particular chapters are unequal. Chapters 6 and 11 are not based on solid methodological grounds, being simple descriptions of the situation in particular countries, and there is a lot of historical information that is irrelevant to the main thesis. Furthermore, two chapters are redundant with regards to the book's main thesis, one of them being Andreescu's description of the Romanian Orthodox Church, which does not provide convincing information on why this institution is an influential actor within the Romanian radical right. Another recurring issue is the problem of what exactly "Eastern Europe" means. According to the United Nations Statistic Division (UNSD), the Baltic countries are located in Northern Europe [5]. The remaining states in that geographical part of the continent are attributed to Eastern Europe. However, it is commonly held that Poland, Czech Republic, and Slovakia are located in the central part of the continent, while Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria are held to be part of South-Central Europe. Ukraine being located in Eastern Europe is the least controversial of all.

All of which brings us to the second redundant chapter: Polyakova's essay about radical right parties and movements in Ukraine, which is interesting and well-prepared despite being the only non-EU outlier. Croatia might have served as a better case study in lieu of Ukraine given that other South-Central European countries and members of the EU are also described in this volume. Furthermore, Minkenberg himself creates confusion when he writes that "the country cases chosen include those new democracies in the region which have been under Soviet (i.e. foreign) control prior to 1989, have established democratic regimes since then and have advanced their transformation by becoming members of the European Union in 2004 and 2007" (p. 3). Romania cannot be included in this group because Ceausescu's regime was not under "Soviet control". Additionally, there are noticeable differences in every author's nomenclature. Some authors use the term "radical right" (e.g. pp. 106, 138, 252, 290, 304), while others employ "extreme right" (e.g. pp. 278, 281, 291), and "populist radical right" (e.g. pp. 80, 97, 151, 299, 301, 307), even though these have not traditionally had the same meaning [6].

To summarise, Minkenberg's volume is noteworthy mostly because of the new perspectives it offers on the research of radical right parties, and not only with regard to Eastern Europe. It focuses on more than parties and elections, analysing their interactions with other radical/extreme/populist right entities and their subsequent effects on the political process. Another advantage of this book is that, for the most part, it moves beyond
Descriptive and all-encompassing analyses which are typical for political party case studies (p. 3). Offering a portrait of the Eastern European radical right just before its electoral and political success, Minkenberg helps to understand current processes. Conversely, the book is already somewhat outdated; it shows how fast Europe is changing and how scholars of political science are struggling to keep up with the quickly evolving political landscape. However, it is also a must-read for mainstream politicians all over Europe because it could help them avoid making errant decisions during election season. Looking at the present situation in Austria, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Estonia, one can observe the same mistakes made by mainstream politicians, which may well move the political scene in those countries more to the radical right. If that happens, it will be the triumph of "illiberal democracy" in Europe and therefore the end of the European Union.


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Zitierweise: