

BOOK REVIEWS

Review 1

Title: Handbook of Direct Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989. By Maria Marczevska-Rytko (2018). 352 p. Berlin: Barbara Budrich Publishers. ISBN-10: 3847421220

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The book “*Handbook of Direct Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989*”, edited by Professor Maria Marczevska-Rytko, and co-authored by Polish, Bulgarian, Ukrainian and other academics, was published by Barbara Budrich Publishers in 2018 with 23 chapters and 352 pages. The aim of the book is the holistic and interdisciplinary political analysis of direct democracy as reflected in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries after 1989. There is no national referendum process in America, but variations of the procedure exist at the state and local level. The champion of national referenda in Europe is Switzerland.

The methodology employed in this book is the use of referendum procedures in CEE nations which is one dimension of direct democracy. Each nation is examined as to whether or not the referendum process has been employed and the relative success or failure of the procedure when tried. It should be mentioned that the referendum process is very European with the use in Switzerland being deemed very successful. That is the Swiss put major political issues on a ballot to be approved or not approved directly by the voter. The CEE authors have done a good job of presenting where the process has worked, has been manipulated by government, has failed to work mostly depending on low voter turnout or has never been tried.

The Central East European nations after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 moved from communist rule to various forms of democracy (failing in Russia). This book examines the trajectory each nation has taken based on an examination of one important dimension of direct democracy – the use of popular referendum. The book represents an important examination of the transition from one party communist rule to the embrace of democratic procedures.

Each nation is on a different course with Hungary restricting referendums at the national level. Other nations have different trends. Estonia is, e.g., seen as moving nicely to direct democracy, but still has a “complicated ethnic situation” (with its Russian minority). (p. 106) Belarus is an example of a perceived failure of direct democracy. The authoritarian regime is accused of manipulation referenda procedures to confirm the government’s objectives. (pp. 37-38)

Hungary represents exhibited negative citizens attitude toward direct democracy. (p. 109) The Hungarian Head of State Viktor Orban’s tendency to gradually limit the applica-

bility of the tools of direct democracy in Hungary, "... seem to assure the ruling party's virtually complete legislative monopoly." Orban is anti-immigration and exhibits a "tough attitude" (i.e., negative) towards the European Union (EU).

The author omits discussion of the anti-immigration and anti-EU mood of the current Polish government, which is similar to Hungarian developments. Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson states, ("How Poland And Hungary Are Forming A Powerful Tag Team Against Brussels." *Parallels*, National Public Radio, Inc. (US). <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2018/03/12>) "...the European Union increases pressure on the two countries (Hungary and Poland) to tamp down on what Brussels views as their attacks on democracy." Sarhaddi Nelson refers to "... an unprecedented Article 7 (withdrawing certain EU rights) proceeding against Warsaw." Anti-immigration and anti-independent judiciary trends necessary for checks and balances in democratic government are present in Poland today.

In Albania, there have been no public referenda. In Belarus, the process is difficult. In Bulgaria they are a "tool for winning political dividends." (p. 327) The process has failed in Croatia. There have been many local referendums in the Czech Republic. They have been used in Estonia at the city level. In Hungary, the local referendum procedure has been applied, but not at the national level. In the Republic of Kosovo there is "no experience in using the institutions of direct democracy." (p. 328)

Latvia has national level referenda as in Lithuania. The situation in Moldova, Montenegro and Romania is doubtful. This appears to be the case of all the remaining CEE nations. In the Baltic states citizen awareness and political activity is high. This is also the case of Bosnia – Herzegovina. Hungary and Poland are regressing to a non-democratic situation. "The Russian Federation is not a democratic country." (p. 339) The accession of some of these CEE nations to be EU had mixed results in promoting direct democracy.

Overall, the book contributes to the analysis of 21 CEE countries most of which initiated the process of democratization and economic transformation (often very successful, however starting from an economic base far below Western Europe) after 1989. The book is suitable for a scholarly audience as well as anyone interested in CEE developments. Scholars of representative democracy and Central Eastern Europe, in particular, will find this book a valuable addition in understanding the direction CEE nations are taking.