

Reviews. Reports

Kamil Aksiuto, review of Maria Marczewska-Rytko (ed.), *Handbook of Direct Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989*, Barbara Budrich Publishers, Berlin–Toronto 2018, 351 pp.

The countries situated in Central and Eastern Europe still deserve attention of the political scientists. If for no other reason, this is due to the challenges created by the break-up of the USSR, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia as well as the subsequent transformation of the political and economic system these states tried to carry out in their individual ways. The reviewed volume approaches the issues signalled above from a specific angle. *Handbook of Direct Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989* focuses on the group of 21 Central and Eastern European states (mostly Balkan states as well as countries which were a part of the USSR or were dominated by it) and aims to analyse the processes of implementation into their legal system of the instruments of direct democracy as well as the political practice of the use of those instruments.

The structure of the book is straightforward and logical. After an *Introduction* part the reader is presented with a list of chapters which deal with individual countries. The latter were listed in alphabetical order (starting with Albania and ending with Ukraine). Moreover, all chapters have a uniform structure which consists of four parts related to direct democracy: *Determinants*, *Formal-Legal Dimension*, *Practical Dimension*, *Conclusions*. The book ends with a segment entitled: *Direct Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989: Conclusion* which purports to summarize the results of research and verify the hypotheses which were listed in the introduction (more on that to follow shortly).

Although the institutions of direct democracy in individual states which are analysed in the book have already been described in the literature of the field, the volume is still worthwhile as a compendium. It offers a reliable and reasonably in-depth guide for the readers who are not very familiar with the political systems of Central and Eastern Europe as well as with a formal and practical dimension of direct democracy in the region. Many Western political scientists still seem to lack in-depth knowledge of these issues and, therefore, they are most likely to benefit from the publication of the volume. Furthermore, the quality of the research work done by the authors of most chapters with regard to the forms of direct democracy in individual countries deserves praise. They mostly delivered on the promise of analysing both the formal regulations concerning the instruments of direct democracy and their practical use, especially with regard

to the national referenda. Therefore, I must stress that the following critical remarks are not meant to take anything away from this accomplishment.

The main doubts raised by the reviewed publication are related to the second and third research hypotheses which are presented in the *Introduction*. The second hypothesis is stated as follows: "(...) the use of the instruments of direct democracy in the process of exercising power is an indicator of the political awareness of the Central and Eastern European societies" (p. 8). The reader is not given any explanation what is to be understood by "political awareness", whether, for instance, it is a quantitative or qualitative concept. It is also unclear what precisely is meant by an "indicator". It seems to me that in such a general form this hypothesis is simply unfalsifiable. Yet in the concluding part of the book it is asserted that the second hypothesis was confirmed only in some of the countries in question and that "(...) to the citizens and political elites of some countries in the region (Belarus, the Czech Republic, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, Russia, and Ukraine) the institutions of direct democracy are not important or they serve to accomplish particularistic political interests of those in power" (p. 334). This seems puzzling unless we interpret the hypothesis charitably to roughly mean: the use of instruments of direct democracy (especially those which are initiated bottom-up) is correlated with a high level of interest in public matters and willingness to engage in the political decision-making exhibited by the members of a given society. And indeed the authors of the subsequent chapters do seem to understand it in a similar way to the one given above. Stated in this form the hypothesis seems at least to be falsifiable. However, individual chapters usually do not go far enough towards its verification. For the accomplishment of this task would require not only the analysis of the direct democracy tools utilized in a given country, but also an examination of the political awareness of its society. The latter part is typically underdeveloped in quite a few individual chapters, although with some notable exceptions.

The third hypothesis is stated as follows: "(...) the process of accession of the Central and Eastern European countries to the European Union had an impact on the development of direct democracy in these countries (in the formal-legal and practical aspects)" (p. 8). This is still too general, but leaving that aside, how is this hypothesis to be verified? In the *Conclusion* part, it is claimed that the hypothesis was only partially confirmed in some Central and Eastern European countries (among countries in which it was not confirmed are not only Czechia and Slovakia, but – for some reason – also Kosovo, Macedonia and Moldova which are not members of the EU, p. 338). The arguments supporting this conclusion include: 1) the fact that 9 of the countries which joined the EU since 2004 held accession referenda, 2) the access to the EU structures gave citizens of the new member states an opportunity to use the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI). These are sound arguments, but in my opinion, it is at the very least contestable whether taken on their own they go far enough in order to confirm the hypothesis even partially. As important as accession referenda was the fact they were *ad hoc* events and it is hard to judge how much they have contributed to the education of citizens on the virtues of direct democracy. Furthermore, the ECI is still a relatively new instrument and its potential for empowering Europeans remains to be determined. The empirical data gathered thus far, however, does not encourage optimism, as only 4 initiatives from more than 60 have been successful.

Finally, the introduction to the reviewed volume clearly states that one of the research objectives of the contributors was: “(...) the analysis of historical, cultural, civilizational, socio-political and international determinants which contributed to the implementation or rejection of specific institutions of direct democracy” (p. 8). This task seems to be too ambitious for its own good. As mentioned before, each chapter begins with a section titled *Determinants*. However, what the contributors typically focus on in this part of their texts is a recapitulation of the political history of a given country. These recapitulations vary in how detailed they are and in terms of their historical scope (some are confined to the 20th and 21st centuries, while others go further back than this), but that is not the main problem here. The description of the major political events in the recent decades is not a substitute for an analysis of cultural, civilizational and social determinants of direct democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. In all fairness, one can find remarks in other parts of the individual chapters which can be interpreted as addressing those preconditions of direct democracy. Yet, it is hardly a full-fledged analysis. Indeed, it is doubtful whether the authors could have accomplished this task within a confined space of an article.

To sum up, *Handbook of Direct Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989* provides the reader with an ample material for reflection. It is a valuable publication with most of its shortcomings originating from the excess of ambition rather than its lack. Hopefully, the future publications involving the contributors to the volume will benefit from that.

