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Curry and Urban's "The Left Transformed in Post-Communist Societies: The Cases of East-Central Europe, Russia, and Ukraine" - Book Review

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Ružica Cacanovska, a sociologist from Skopje, Macedonia, applies similar categories to the study of Romas in Macedonia but her essay is strictly descriptive, providing statistical data about Roma membership among Protestant churches in Macedonia. A much more detailed, but often highly confusing and tedious is the study by Magdalena Slavkova, a Bulgarian sociologist who studied the change in identity of Protestant converts among “Turkish Gypsies,” a complex ethno-religious minority group in Bulgaria.

All in all, it is highly commendable that the group of scholars assembled around *Junir* and the journal *Teme*, most of whom are on the faculty of the University of Niš, continue their efforts to assemble scholars from the region and beyond to explore various religious phenomena in a scholarly manner and that they have translated the collection into English so that it becomes useful to a wider readership. The translation into English is quite inconsistent. Some articles, like Aleksov’s, are extremely well translated, while some other’s are not (phrases like Lord’s Dinner or God’s Supper are examples of infelicitous translations), but actually all of them are readable. They would benefit from editorial assistance by a native English speaker, but we commend them for their effort even in the absence of such help.

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Jane Leftwich Curry and Joan Barth Urban. eds. ***The Left Transformed in Post-Communist Societies: The Cases of East-Central Europe, Russia, and Ukraine.*** Lanham, Boulder, New York, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003. 284 p. - reviewed by Boyka Stefanova.

The Left Transformed in Post-Communist Societies offers a carefully researched and well-written comparative examination of the strategic adaptation of the post-communist parties in representative states of East-Central Europe (Hungary, former East Germany, Lithuania, Poland), Russia, and the Ukraine. The volume consists of an introduction, six individual case studies, and a concluding chapter revisiting the divergent trajectories and shared legacies of the post-communist left. The case studies explore the relative success of the post-communist transformation of

the left through the prism of government structures and electoral systems in Eastern Europe recreated since the early 1990s.

The comparative study of communist successor parties is contextualized within a dichotomy between communist legacies and domestic political institutions. Due to differences in key domestic political institutions, the otherwise common legacies of the communist “party-state” account for significant variation in the conceptual approaches, survival strategies, and electoral outcomes of the communist successor parties. Here the authors differ in the emphasis they place upon the capacity of the post-communist left to mobilize resources, maintain organizational continuity, and reestablish party-citizen linkages. The transformations of the left in Poland (chapter by Jane Curry), Hungary (Diana Morlang), and Lithuania (Algis Krupavicius) reveal distinct win-sets typical of post-communist parties which have abandoned an explicitly communist ideology, gained new legitimacy through social democratic reforms, and recreated a new organizational base. The survival strategy of the East-German post-communist left (chapter by Thomas Baylis) represents a distinct case due to Germany’s unique political and socioeconomic setting since the end of the Cold War. Quite significantly, the post-communist transformation of the left in East Germany may be regarded as the watershed case between a successful party transformation along social-democracy lines and the preservation of communist-era egalitarianism. The case studies of Russia (Luke March) and the Ukraine (Andrew Wilson) reveal profoundly reconfigured post-communist parties which pursue political longevity and electoral support through doctrinal adherence to Leninism. Such strategies have remained applicable due to the deeply polarizing effects of economic transformation in Russia and the Ukraine during the 1990s. Drawing upon the richly contextualized analysis of the individual countries, the concluding chapter (Joan Barth Urban) provides an assessment of the effective transformation of the post-communist parties in Eastern Europe as an instance of the “sudden death” or “creeping Westernization” of communist ideology.

This research makes a valuable contribution to the study of political transitions in Eastern Europe by raising important questions with respect to the

sustainability of the process. First, the book outlines a distinct pattern of successful party remodeling in East-Central Europe. As domestic political competition evolves along pluralist lines, party platforms gravitate towards, and claim legitimacy within, a West-European model. The absence of such homogenizing trends in Russia and the Ukraine largely explains why variation in the electoral performance and ideological commitment of the post-communist left there is likely to persist, blocking political change or further undermining the prospects for democratic consolidation. Second, the book suggests that the post-communist transformation of Eastern Europe is open to the influence of political trends in the West not only through the Europeanization of individual communist successor parties, but also through reemerging nationalism. Conservative political attitudes in Western Europe have been reinforced since September 11th. Issues of nationalism and identity loom large in political discourse. The continued transformation of the political left in Eastern Europe remains contingent upon such developments. Due to the exclusionary use of nationalism as a source of societal mobilization during the communist era, the post-communist parties in Eastern Europe currently are poorly equipped to deal with the potential dangers of this rhetoric. Although the book is optimistic that the post-communists will embrace counterbalancing liberal or socially pro-active positions, questions of nationalism and ethnicity are likely to remain a tool for recreating linkages between post-communist elites and the masses.

The comparisons drawn from the case studies thus lead to the conclusion that the transformation of the communist successor parties in Eastern Europe is an open-ended process. In the search for access to power, their adjustment strategies will continue to produce significant cross-national variation undermining the homogenization of political space in the region.

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