

Governing the Post-Communist City: Institutions and Democratic Development in Prague by Martin Horak. Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 2007. PP 270; index. £35.00 (hardback). ISBN 978-0-8020-9328-8.

Martin Horak's study of city government in Prague in the decade following the collapse of communism seeks to shift the research agenda on democracy in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) from questions of democratic transition and consolidation to issues of governance and democratic quality. High quality democratic performance, Horak suggests, is essentially characterised by transparency in policy-making, openness of policymakers to societal inputs, and long-term strategic coherence of policies adopted. Focusing on urban governance in a capital city such as Prague, he argues, allows a holistic approach linking political, economic and social institutions in political unit sufficiently small to research in depth, but large and complex enough to raise wider issues of institutional evolution and democratic governance.

As the detailed case studies of transport policy and preservation regulations in Prague's historic city centre, which form the core of Horak's book make clear, municipal government the Czech capital after 1989 scored poorly on all key indicators of democratic quality. Policy-making was opaque, piecemeal, expensive, inefficient and largely closed to the public. Such democratic failure was, however, puzzling, as Prague's city government had many prerequisites for success. It rapidly regained strong fiscal and

political autonomy after 1989, had a large professional administrative apparatus and controlled sizeable tax and property resources.

Horak draws on an innovative strand in 'historical institutionalist' literature to explain such underperformance. The key he argues is to be found in the unevenness with which different sets of institutions developed after 1989. While new democratically elected structures of representation quickly emerged in 1990, the structures and policy-making frameworks of municipal administrators remained heavily influenced by the close technocratic practices of the late communist era, when professional planners were largely left alone by Communist Party bosses. Although emergent civic initiatives had some initial influence, inexperienced new city councillors facing multiple demands tended to opt for simple short-term solutions, drawing on existing communist-era policy frameworks or maximising opportunities for personal profit. This trend was exacerbated by the absence of strong regional structures in the centre-right Civic Democratic Party, which dominated Prague politics after 1991, but generally lacked a coherent programme for the city.

Different policy sectors, however, exhibited different dynamics. Transport planning bodies and large formerly state-owned construction companies functioned as a powerful lobby for the exclusion of civil society groups from policy-making and the completion of communist-era motorway building plans. Civic groups quickly settled into a protest oriented strategy, enjoying some success in modifying or blocking the implementation of road building (sending costs spiralling), but were poorly equipped to feed into policy processes when invited to do so. Prague's preservation authorities shared the same technocratic culture but were more open to civic groups, which, like them, generally

opposed the commercialization of historic areas of Prague. However, preservation institutions quickly buckled and fragmented under pressure from local politicians, who blocked systematic and open policymaking in favour of closed, ad hoc decision making which facilitated lucrative relationships with developers and investors. Only when the development potential of historic central Prague was exhausted and national freedom of information legislation forced greater openness was this pattern broken.

Despite occasionally dense passages on Prague history and municipal bureaucracy, Horak has written a fine book, which skilfully interweaves documentary research with interviews with politicians, planners and civic activists, to produce a rich and subtle account of Czech politics capturing many nuances that other accounts overlook. To some extent, the specific nature of Prague as a case study limits the generalisability of the book's findings. Its implicit view of democracy as consensus building between functional actors (business, civil society, bureaucrats and politicians), for example, would not scale up well to most national systems, where party politics is generally more competitive and interests more zero-sum. However, Horak's central theoretical insight is original and compelling: that post-communist democratic development is an evolving mosaic of overlapping institutional structures, each embodying different legacies and each liable to break open into differently timed 'critical junctures' when political choices suddenly become fluid and far reaching. Indeed, his empirical analysis tends to subvert conventional historical institutionalist accounts more radically than he allows. What is most striking is how few realistic opportunities emerged for Prague's overloaded, easily corruptible and programmatically bereft politicians to choose paths away from flawed

democratic practices powerfully shaped by multiple communist-era legacies and rampant new business interests.

Seán Hanley

School of Slavonic and East European Studies

UCL