

Michal Klíma:

**INFORMAL POLITICS IN
POST-COMMUNIST EUROPE:
POLITICAL PARTIES, CLIENTELISM
AND STATE CAPTURE.**

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The new book *Informal Politics in Post-Communist Europe*, written by the Czech political scientist Michal Klíma, belongs to a growing group of contributions on the failure of the post-communist transformation. Its central idea is that, due to a unique legacy of the old regime, the post-communist states are controlled by an informal network of powerful and unscrupulous individuals, occupying the leading positions in political parties, state administration, and in big business. Klíma calls them ‘the new informal nomenklatura’ and claims that they have jointly constructed a new ‘system of particular representation and promotion of interests’ (p. xiv). Members of this elite move freely between the party-political, economic, and administrative realms, manipulating large-scale privatization and mismanaging money from the European Union’s structural funds. They have disregarded formal constitutional and legal constraints, bent the existing rules, and controlled or bypassed governments and parliaments to the point that elections have nearly lost their essential function.

In Klíma’s account, political parties have played a key role in the process of state capture by the informal networks. However, they are primarily understood as venues in which ‘the informal nomenklatura’ grabs and exercises power. The author sees this as a two-stage process. Firstly, parties are privatized from below,

when local and regional politicians-cum-lobbyists recruit fake members, take over the sub-national party branches and secure influential posts in party leadership. By these means, they gain access to government positions and become relevant partners for the leaders of big businesses. In the second stage, political parties are captured and colonized from above: the representatives of the largest companies, whether private or state-owned, collude with party leaders in the government, incorporate them into the new nomenklatura, and jointly exploit public resources for individual gains.

The book aspires to provide a theoretical framework that is universally applicable throughout the post-communist world. Nevertheless, the core parts of the work, chapters 2, 3, and 4, draw from the Czech case between 1998 and 2013. These are the most convincing parts of the book. They provide a fascinating account and a detailed description of how portions of the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) and the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) fell victim to particularistic interests and how several local and regional party organizations were taken over by semi-criminal elements. This was also the period when Public Affairs (Věci veřejné), a new political party, was set up and controlled by an owner of the largest private security service in the country, and perfected the art of surveillance of friends and foes alike to use the wiretaps in political competition. The author also describes several cases of how witnesses in high-profile criminal cases were discredited or harassed by members of state security services and the police, all to protect leading political figures.

Klíma himself observes a remarkable similarity between the Czech case and the situation in Italy in the early 1990s (pp. 95–96), where systemic corruption and state exploitation eventually led to the breakdown of the existing party system and the rise of new po-

litical parties. Unfortunately, the book does not explore this line of investigation. Instead, it pursues a narrative of a structural similarity with other post-communist countries. It produces generalizations that aim to be, at least in principle, as applicable to central European EU member states as to Russia, Ukraine, and post-Soviet Central Asia. The limits of such an approach become immediately visible in the virtual absence of any debate in the book about the role of the political regime in the emergence of the 'post-communist clientelism'. If the Czech parties have played a central role, as the book suggests, then party competition, voter mobilization, and political contestation must be relevant. After all, despite all its defects, democratic mechanisms have played a key role in the Czech Republic. However, this has not been the case in many post-Soviet countries that are said to share the basic structural similarities.

There is very little in the book that would explain how such structural similarities inherited from the communist era shape the informal networks of power throughout the post-communist world. The author mentions personal networks, classmates, co-workers, neighbours (pp. 9–10), and the critical role of 'the previous communist nomenklatura' as crucial transmission ties. However, the extent to which such elements survived after the end of communism varies sharply across the region. Moreover, as Klíma's description of ČSSD and ODS makes clear, the new 'informal nomenklatura' evolved gradually and was not in place in the Czech Republic in the early 1990s. The book remains mostly silent about the intra-party processes in ČSSD, ODS, and other parties in the 1990s. Readers are left with a rather static picture of the phase when the Czech parties had already been transformed into 'clientelist machines', and learn little about the circumstances under which such a transformation took place.

The book argues that the examples of state privatization, state colonization, and party-business collusion are not isolated episodes but instead form a self-sustaining system of what he interchangeably calls 'a clientelist polity', a post-communist form of 'state-centred clientelism', and collusion of powerful firms, national politicians, and bureaucrats. Interestingly, he argues that the substantial decentralization of ODS and ČSSD enabled their 'privatization from below', thus making them vulnerable to predatory private interests. However, he does not consider the possibility that what he sees as a coordinated effort of an all-powerful cabal of political operators is, in fact, the result of a weak state that is open to a multitude of unrelated and 'decentralized' exploitations. Instances of intense competition within 'the informal networks' are not considered, even though they would call into question the main argument.

To draw a picture of a clientelist polity, Klíma's argumentation is, at times, unconvincing. The book argues that patronage and civil service politicization are critical components of the process of state capture, but the evidence provided is superficial at best. Similarly, the book maintains that the significance of elections decreased over time but simultaneously describes the electoral backlash against the ODS and ČSSD and the rise of new entrepreneurial parties through competitive elections. Passages about the loss of representative functions of political parties, about the decreasing competition among the parties, and the rise of new leader-centred parties all fail to acknowledge that they also take place in many advanced post-industrial countries. Consequently, they cannot be the results of the processes in a clientelist post-communist polity.

Arguably, the conceptual and broader theoretical aspects of the work are least convincing. Even though the author uses familiar political science concepts such as clientelism,

cleavages, and critical juncture, he modifies them to the point that they have little in common with their use in the comparative politics literature. As the author believes that post-communism is a unique world that requires completely different (unique) concepts and definitions, such an approach may be justified. However, by doing so, he contributes little to the accumulation of understanding of the key social and political phenomena. Conceptual stretching is supplemented by the proliferation of metaphors that at times obscure rather than reveal: to illustrate his points, the author describes the new nomenclature as 'permeat[ing] into all the pores of the political sphere' (p. 12), corrupt exchanges between politicians and economic elites are a 'Turkish bazaar' (p. 19) and a 'clientelist Schengen' (p. 25), and a 'definitional perpetuum mobile' is needed to elucidate a strategy of concept formation and definition of the key terms (emphasis added).

Informal Politics in Post-Communist Europe is an innovative and provocative work that enhances our understanding of the factors that contributed to the demise of the Czech party system dominated by the ODS and ČSSD. It provides plenty of examples of how democratic political parties got increasingly immersed in corrupt practices, and how portions of party organizations may be taken over by particularistic interests. It is less convincing in linking these processes to the legacies of the communist regime, and has a limited explanatory potential beyond the Czech case.

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Michal Kubát, Martin Mejstřík (eds.):

GIOVANNI SARTORI: CHALLENGING POLITICAL SCIENCE.

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A giant of political science, source of inspiration, provocative thinker, uncompromising critic of political life in Italy in particular. These are just some of the expressions used in the book *Giovanni Sartori: Challenging Political Science*. The celebration, or better *Festschrift*, of the political science classic, who died a few years ago, involves different perspectives and scholars. Strong, not only in number, is the representation of the texts by Italian political scientists: Gianfranco Pasquino, Oreste Massari and Giovanni Capoccia. The last of whom wrote the preface of the book. Klaus von Beyme, another great scholar, also contributed to the book. They are joined by several scholars from the Czech Republic, Michal Kubát, Martin Mejstřík, Miroslav Novák, and Maxmilán Strmiska, and Marek Bankowicz from Poland. This review reflects some ideas which interested me in the book.

The texts naturally reflect Sartori's contribution to various spheres of political science. However, his intense attempts to influence Italian politics in the spirit of his thinking are worth mentioning – as well as the poor result of this effort. Oreste Massari in particular describes Sartori's proposals for reforms of Italian constitutional institutions in the 1990s. During this period Sartori wrote not only scholarly texts and participated in consultative committees on constitutional reforms, but was also intensively engaged in public debate and even became a television star. In the end,