

Otto Eibl, Miloš Gregor et al.:

### THIRTY YEARS OF POLITICAL CAMPAIGNING IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE.

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The study of political campaigning and political marketing represents a very important aspect of political science today, and clearly derives its importance from the fact that campaigns and marketing are intimately linked with the actual and practical functioning of today's politics, where well-conceived electoral campaigns constitute a crucial aspect of the road to success in elections and potentially to government power.

Political campaigns and the changing role and nature of media engagement in them substantially influence contemporary democratic political systems. Scholarly reflection on the changeable instruments of political campaigning is relevant in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond. This region is ideal for a detailed comparative study of these changes, given that the countries involved have the common experience of undergoing a transition from their preceding communist one-party systems. However, these systems had various ideological profiles, and drew their legitimacy from sources that were often quite dissimilar.

*Thirty Years of Political Campaigning in Central and Eastern Europe* is thus a significant contribution to the debate about the character and evolution of political campaigning in the countries of the region. It is a unique cross-sectional comparative study, taking as its perspective the whole of East-Central Europe, a region that shares to various degrees

the former patronage of the Soviet Union and membership in the Eastern Bloc. The democratic countries of this region continue to be understood as so-called new democracies. The book thus covers not just various countries, but also various political systems, their functions and the challenges they face. It is a particularly important work for its concise and integral emphasis on evolving political campaigns, yet it also successfully outlines the major points of socio-political development, which so distinctly informed the history and evolution of these countries in the recent past. Indeed, many of these developments cannot be strictly separated from issues of elections and campaigning, as they are more or less related to them, or even formed part of them (consider the impacts of the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine or the regime change in Serbia in 2000).

In their introduction, Eibl and Gregor present political marketing approaches as part of contemporary political communication, and describe the most important aspects of the historical developments in the region. In what follows, the countries are thematically clustered according to their geographic location; this significantly aids the book's intelligibility. Given how diverse the region is, this clustering also shows how the level of development and certain trends change in its various (geopolitical) parts.

Each chapter gives a brief overview of a country and its political system since 1989 and then covers the limitations placed on elections and the options provided for campaigning and agitation *de jure*, according to current legislation (typically, for example, campaign spending limits and access to public service broadcasters). It then provides a historical overview of campaigning, and concludes with contemporary developmental trends. Each chapter is augmented with a synoptic table, detailing the key and other notable aspects,

such as the electoral system, the character of the competition, the topics and issues, and the presence of external advisers in political party campaigning. From today's point of view, it provides a very useful summary of the instruments that political parties have used in successive campaigns; this provides a good aid to diachronic comparison. The tables also sometimes help to orient readers and assist their understanding where the structure of the chapter is not very clear, such as the one on Latvia, in which the text tends to skip years and elections. Each chapter therefore aims to present an overview framework, which is set up consistently across the book, and thus to provide a clear outline of the character of campaigning and the rules, and the way these have functioned in practice over time.

The book is based on a relatively simple concept, which includes not only the aspect of historical development and transformation of campaigns, but also another relatively clear and intelligible aspect: their professionalisation. This is the moment when campaigns are dramatically transformed, become more specialised and are treated more strategically and technically.

Yet it is in this concept that, from the point of view of a neutral or less expert reader, we can see the biggest problem. Although the professionalisation of campaigns is conceptualised at the beginning of the book and its broader understanding is suggested – it is often automatically incorrectly linked with the Americanisation of campaigns – it is not defined how the book's co-authors understand the concept in their own chapters, something that would help to make the book more intelligible. This aspect needs noting, in particular because the chapters do not always make it clear which moment in the ongoing evolution of campaigning should be taken as the turning point on the way to professionalisation. Indeed, for some countries, this moment is unclear or debat-

able. Given that a clear demarcation is absent in this respect, readers are left without clearly identifiable factors that would aid their orientation in this direction. For example, in the chapter on Estonia it is not clear whether the swing to professionalisation occurred with the rise of the Res Publica party, or subsequently, when there was further polarisation in the system. The situation is similar in the chapter on Hungary, where no breakthrough point facilitating greater or overall professionalisation can be identified in the text.

Another option would be to note this turning point explicitly in the text, but this is largely absent (one of the exceptions is the Czech Republic and its very specific parliamentary elections in 2006). Thus the decisive or sufficient condition is unclear. Is it, generally speaking, the presence of foreign advisers, a strongly polarised campaign, or the use of the most recent types of media to support the waging of a political campaign (something that could be traced back to the 2005 and 2007 elections in Poland)?

However, this is the only major weakness (albeit one concerned with the very principle on which the book is based) in what is otherwise a comprehensive work. By contrast, the book should be commended for not being concerned solely with the narrow field of election campaigns; it very often contextualises the information and the developments in the individual countries, providing a broader background. This is of substantial benefit to the overall intelligibility of the text, allowing readers to understand the principal information, characteristics and nature of the various campaigns. What is more, the book reflects the specificities of the countries studied, yet does not drift into extended descriptions beyond its central topic.

The book's merit goes beyond providing a historical perspective, by also allowing for a comparison of the developments and trends

across various countries. Although the overall development and direction in the forms and characteristics of the campaigns in all countries is towards a greater role for the internet and social networks, the book notes various national specificities and differences (such as the ban on outdoor political advertising in Estonia).

Overall, in the perspective of their development, the book combines the aspects of campaigns and political marketing, putting them in the broader context of the development of societies and political systems of the countries

studied. This benefits the completeness and professionalism of the book, making a substantial contribution to the study of political campaigning in Central and Eastern Europe. Most of the countries in this region continue to adapt to, and in many respects develop in the likeness of, long-established campaigning trends of Western democracies, even if, at certain moments, this brings surprising and unexpected twists or turns.

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