Title
Parties and democracy in the post-Soviet republics: The case of Estonia.

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1w46d73h

Journal
PARTY POLITICS, 5(2)

ISSN
1354-0688

Author
Taagepera, R

Publication Date
1999-04-01

DOI
10.1177/1354068899005002008

Peer reviewed
BOOK REVIEWS


This valuable addition to the study of party formation in new democracies gives a detailed account of the genesis of Estonian post-Soviet parties, explains why the reform communists failed to make an early comeback, and places these developments within several broader frameworks.

The first comparison basis is democratic transition and consolidation in East-Central Europe (ch. 1), followed by that in the former Soviet Union (ch. 2). Parties, preferably based on socio-economic groupings, are assumed to be indispensable for democracy. In postcommunist countries, however, social cleavages are fuzzy and anti-party feelings are strong. The next comparison basis is pre-Soviet Estonia (ch. 3), where the author also sees anti-party ingredients. The harsh Soviet occupation was first dented by diffuse mass protest in 1987 (ch. 4). In Lithuania a renamed Communist Party managed a later electoral comeback; in contrast, the Estonian CP, though equally reformist, was left high and dry, and the book weighs the various explanations (ch. 5).

The crucial struggle for democratization and national liberation was carried out in the context of mass movements such as the Popular Front, the Greens, the more radical Citizens’ Committees, and the reactionary Intermovement of the Russian colonists (ch. 6). As success seemed within grasp, the break-up of movements into small proto-parties began (ch. 7). The detailed description of the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of this process may be the most valuable part of the book, along with its post-independence continuation, culminating in the parliamentary election of 1992 (ch. 8). The analysis of the 1995 election (ch. 9) looks more like an afterthought and is marred by erroneous tabulation of results: contrary to Table 9.3, the right-wingers won 5 seats (not the reported 0), individual candidates won 0 seats (not 13), and the non-tabulated Fatherland won 8 seats (cf. *Electoral Studies* 14: 247).

The conclusions (ch. 10) belatedly acknowledge the possibility of weakened partisan alignment in western democracies. This hypothesis should have been considered up front, because it puts the entire central assumption of the book...
into question, namely that democracy without parties is unthinkable. In line with this assumption, Estonia is seen trying to catch up with the West, building voter loyalty to party institutions rather than allegiance to individual politicians. But if dealignment is real in the West (partly because TV stresses personalities and displaces the parties from their information-providing role), then Estonia could actually be seen as taking a shortcut into the western future.

Even if we assume that parties are bound to remain, however retrenched, redefined, and reduced in mass membership, I still sense two gaps in the treatment: general speed of party formation, and party loyalty of politicians. First, another background chapter on the speed of party system formation in western countries would have been desirable. The development of such a system in Estonia (and elsewhere in new democracies) is described as painfully slow, implying that the process went faster in the West – but the reverse is true. It took Estonia’s Scandinavian neighbors half a century to proceed from the first proto-parties of the mid-1800s to constellations that could be called party systems, without utterly diluting the meaning of the term ‘system’. True, restoration has been faster in countries where democracy existed before an authoritarian or totalitarian interlude, and Estonia superficially fits this label. However, the atomization of society and economy under Soviet rule was far more severe than in Spain under Franco or even the communist regimes in Central Europe.

Second, the book somewhat impatiently waits for Estonian electors to develop some party loyalty. The book recognizes that for such stabilization to occur the socio-economic cleavage lines must become clearer and parties must begin to woo specific segments instead of offering vague catch-all platforms. However, there is another precondition. Politicians themselves must stop party-hopping, and this aspect is underplayed in the book, although its descriptive part well follows the gyrations of people like Tiit Made. This former communist became one the founders of the Green movement, yet did not join either of the subsequent Green parties. Instead, he was part of the inner circle of the nascent Democratic Labor Party, flirted with reform communists, and then flipped from left to right, creating an Enterpreneurial Party. The end of the book finds him chair of the Centre Party (from which he subsequently bolted, along with a group who founded the Development Party).

While Made is an extreme case, triple shifts have been numerous. In 1995, 44 incumbents were re-elected (out of 101), but a full one-third of them (16) ran under a new party label (Electoral Studies 14: 331). How on earth could voters develop any party loyalty before the politicians themselves do? This may be a major factor in explaining the ‘anti-party’ sentiment the book observes.

The country specialist will find a number of misspellings of Estonian names and terms, as well as minor factual errors, but they do not impinge on the core issue of party formation. Based on interviews and on English- and Finnish-language sources, Arter has done a remarkable job in piecing together the turbulent history of Estonian party genesis.

Rein Taagepera

University of California, Irvine
and Tartu University, Estonia