

Reviews

Grigorij Mesežnikov – Oľga Gyárfášová – Miroslav Kollár (eds.): Slovakia Votes. European and Presidential Elections in 2009

Institute for Public Affairs, Bratislava 2009, 206 pages plus DVD

Institute for Public Affairs (IVO) in Bratislava has been mapping various types of elections in Slovakia for more than a decade and it would be a hard task to find one significant election event that had not been covered by IVO publication. In this sense, IVO's contribution to the better understanding of Slovak politics is invaluable and irreplaceable. Such an example is also the work *Slovakia votes*, in which a team of IVO analysts reinforced by academics from the Comenius University and the Slovak Academy of Sciences analyses presidential elections and elections into European parliament in Slovakia.

It does not hold true in case of this publication that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. On the contrary, with such an experienced editorial team one is very surprised that introductory and closing chapter is missing and that the book is more a collection of independent studies. It would not necessarily be a weakness if the work was monothematic. In this case, however, two different election events are the subject of analysis the connection of which would require more than just stating that one was followed shortly after the other in 2009. (Perhaps the only time in the work, where both election acts are analytically connected is a short paragraph on page 60, in which Vladimír Krivý compares changes in voter turnout in presidential and European elections.) Yet several chapters as well as the character of studied elections offer material to connect the chapters into a strong whole: similar mobilizing strategies of several parties and candidates making use of ethnic division in Slovakia, election that does not lead to an executive power in Slovakia and the resulting laxer mobilising efforts of the parties, important role of candidates and their individual campaigns (very clear in presidential elections, and significantly present in the elections to EP) and suchlike.

Quality of individual chapters differs greatly. This however cannot be really avoided in case of collections. The biggest differences consist in a different level of using clear methodology and theoretical tools for the analysis of Slovak cases. The best chapter by Oľga Gyárfášová is analysing election behaviour in the European parliament elections. This text may serve as an example for our political scientists and political sociologists; it contains an attractive „mystery“ (high support of the EU membership combined with a low interest in its functioning), relevant research question (factors of (no) voter turnout and selection of parties by voters), setting the research issue into a meaningful theoretical frame (theory of second-rate elections), strong empirical methodological setting (behaviourism, primary data from public opinion polls) and a meaningful comparative dimension (elections to EP in other states of the European Union). Gyárfášová shows that „lack of information“ as a reason often mentioned for not taking part in the elections to the

EP is not the key that would explain the low interest in European elections. What plays the decisive role is the low motivation to participate connected on the one hand with how one views his/her own possibilities to influence the matters and on the other is the outcome of a common distrust in politics and politicians as well as with the influence of one's environment („nobody went to the polls). These are the role of education and age, since particularly better educated middle-aged people were documented to have above-average turnout. Author mostly focuses on individual motivation and determinants of election behaviour and touches the mediating role of political parties only tangentially. This is an acceptable simplification given the research question and limited scope of the text. Weakly documented or questionable claims can be found too (Monika Flašíková Beňová as the most visible member of EP (p. 78); disputable is also how the Smer-SD party was singled out as the one, which was mobilising voters by topics related to home and not European affairs (p. 80), although she does not show whether other parties successful in the elections proceeded or could have proceeded in a different manner). These are, however, less important details considering that the text does not only have superior professional quality, but is very readable, too.

The following chapters based on the analysis of election results and on individual election behaviour are also creditable, although theoretical support is missing. Chapter on the results of presidential elections was written by Vladimír Krivý, who shows how the support of the two main rivals for presidency was closely connected with the support of governmental, or opposition parties. He adds that only approximately one third of the votes of the opposition candidate Iveta Radičová came from Hungarian minority or voters from Bratislava. However, several conclusions of this chapter can be considered more as well-founded hypotheses rather than as absolute conclusions mostly due to the character of the data. Krivý's analysis was namely based on aggregated data, particularly on regional and local results of candidates and parties in elections. In order to validate the conclusions about the efficiency of ethnic mobilisation and of a negative campaign or disprove the assumption (not considered by the author of the chapter) that the decided voters „were saving their energy“ and deliberately did not participate until the second round of elections – thus a negative and ethnic campaign did not influence their decisions – it would be necessary to have data available from the individual level of voters. This is not a criticism, merely a suggestion for further analysis.

Chapter by Zora Bútorová brings a remarkable finding regarding the occurrence of gender based voting in the presidential elections. Based on public opinion polls performed after the elections she concludes that voters of the most of parliamentary parties manifested gender solidarity in a form of higher support of Iveta Radičová among women voters than among men voters. As for the supporters of I. Gašparovič, he was viewed as a protector of the interests of the majority nation, whereas his challenger was linked with an image of a protector of the rights of the Hungarian minority.

Texts on activities of political parties and presidential candidates did not turn out very well. Both chapters, written by Grigorij Mesežnikov, have shortcomings that consist mainly in their descriptive character, lack of theoretical framing and of clear data collecting method. To give just one example, chapter on political parties in European elections contains subchapters about programming priorities of the main candidate parties; it is however not clear at all why the author declares the selected themes as priorities. The main research „tool“ of both chapters relies on news agency reports and newspaper articles. What is missing is the methodical collection and evaluation of data, for example by content analysis of programmes or appearances of party leaders during the campaign, or an attempt to explain the actions of parties by applying a suitable theoretical frame. Similarly, chapter on activities of candidates for president does not contain any methodical attempt to map and evaluate candidates' strategies even though several tools would make such mapping possible (interviews, expert polls, analysis of public appearances etc.). With their rigorous character and missing research methods, these chapters fall behind the texts by sociologists. This is a pity, since thematically they represent a significant key to explain the outcomes of both elections.

In case of political parties, this gap has been partially filled by the Jozef Batora's text on the programming closeness of both Smer and SDKÚ with their related European parties. To what extent do the programmes of European and both biggest Slovak parties overlap is what Batora is interested in. With both parties it makes more than 70 %, but there are differences between the Slovak and the European parties in both cases (green investments, fiscal and tax policy in case of SDKÚ and migration, gender equity and protection of national interests in case of Smer). Rather unfortunate is the conceptual and theoretical frame, which this otherwise interesting analysis is set in. Chapter starts with a discussion on the models for re-constituting the democracy in EU and then analyses congruence of programmes of two Slovak and their European partner parties. Author himself admits that his research brings relevant answers only for a minor section of representation models (one aspect of two political parties in one country) thus restricting his potential conclusions and contribution to the topic. Besides, procedural aspect of the creation of programmes for both Slovak parties, also touched upon by Batora, is rather weak from empirical viewpoint and more emphasis is laid on the outcome of the process (form and congruence of election programmes). More suitable as theoretical basis for Batora's analysis would be either the Europeanization of political parties or the concept of international programme and policy transfer. In any case, we should acknowledge the selection of the topic, under-researched in our milieu, and the attempt to frame the research issue conceptually and theoretically.

Probably the biggest disappointment was the chapter with a very promising title Election Campaign: The Arrival of the New Media by Miroslav Kollár. First of all, the text is not very inventive. Author gives numerous references to his own works published elsewhere. Additionally, large proportion of the text was taken over from

the outcomes of a civic association Memo '98 (focused on media monitoring) on the presentation of candidates by the media. Title is misleading since only several paragraphs are dealing with the „new media“. Apart from that, it is no novelty to conclude that new media was used more often than in the preceding elections thanks to more Internet and social networks users (which particularly applies to younger generation). Chapter gives the impression to have been compiled from issues and sources available at author's immediate disposal and no room was left for key issues concerning the influence of media during presidential elections.

Normative remarks could be found in some chapters of the reviewed book. In case of analytical texts, this is disturbing. Here are just two examples: judging the I. Gašparovič voters' stands, who „were not troubled...that a very close relation of the President to the executive is contributing to the concentration of political power rather than to the search for the most efficient measure against financial and economic crisis“ (p. 187) is more a reflection of author's political persuasion than the outcome of her research. Similarly, judging I. Gašparovič's campaign, who supposedly „weakened the programming dimension of the competition of other candidates“ by „using such general and hardly ever specific formulations, while...these were simplified slogans“ (p. 126) is not appropriate since author does not indicate whether other candidates behaved in a different way and does not say any arguments why the programme competition between candidates for a president without any significant executive power is of „higher quality“ than its other forms.

It should be mentioned that the work is supplemented by CD-ROM with journalistic contributions by a whole range of authors and discussion records on the outcomes of presidential elections organized by IVO. In spite of previous critical evaluation, I recommend those interested in Slovak politics to read Slovakia votes. For one thing, it contains several interesting findings and fine texts and for another it is the best work that has been written on the issue of 2009 Slovak presidential and European elections.

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