

Crafting Democracy

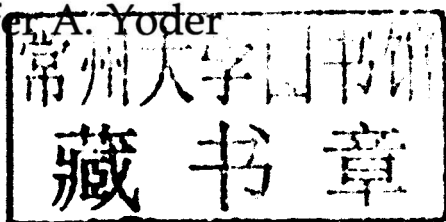
*Regional Politics
in Post-Communist Europe*

JENNIFER A. YODER

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ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.
Lanham • Boulder • New York • Toronto • Plymouth, UK

Published by Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
A wholly owned subsidiary of
The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706
www.rowman.com

10 Thornbury Road, Plymouth PL6 7PP, United Kingdom

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Available

ISBN 978-1-4422-1598-6 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-1-4422-1600-6 (electronic)

™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

Crafting Democracy

**In memory of my father,
Jesse E. Yoder**

Preface

In the course of an earlier study of subnational politics in post-communist eastern Germany, I became aware of neighboring Poland's plans to devolve limited authority to new regions. Many of the German officials with whom I spoke in the late 1990s closely followed the ongoing debates about regional reforms in Poland and, later, in other countries to the east. I became curious about the progress of the reforms and embarked on a study of their origins and outcomes. When I began to visit the countries of East Central Europe,¹ I was surprised to learn that, apart from public officials, most people knew little to nothing about the new, regional level of decision making. At home at Colby College in Maine, when I asked my students from East Central Europe what they thought about the new voivodships in Poland or *kraje* in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, they either had never heard of them or had only vague ideas about the reasons for their creation or their responsibilities. Neither the media nor the students' families and friends at home seemed to pay attention to the new regional assemblies. Few had knowledge or opinions about the regions' potential to affect the political landscapes of their countries. It took about a decade and a couple of election cycles before people began to take notice of the new regions:

"The Czech regions have been painted orange!"²

"Regional Armageddon!"³

The October 2008 elections for the Czech *kraje*, or regional, assemblies illustrate the sobering realization that the regional reforms might have an impact on Czech politics. As a result of the elections, the third since the regions were created in 2000, all of the contested regions⁴ were won by the Social Democrats (CSSD), who rally under the color orange. This

marked a sharp turnaround from the previous elections in 2004, when the ČSSD's rival party, the Civic Democrats (ODS), dominated twelve of the fourteen regional councils. Previously seen as unimportant by voters and commentators, the 2008 regional elections sent shock waves through the center-right government of Czech prime minister Topolánek. In the days and weeks after the Czech regions were "painted orange," whether Topolánek's government would survive a vote of confidence and whether the Czech Republic would assume the rotating presidency of the European Union in January 2009 as planned were both cast in doubt.

Perhaps the Czechs are learning what the electorates and political leaders of Western European societies have known for some time: regions matter. Whether the regions have some historical basis, as in Bavaria, Bretagne, or the Basques Country, or whether they are relatively new constructs, as in Rhône-Alpes or Baden-Württemberg, regions have become important cultural, political, and economic arenas and actors in their own right. The regional level is a sphere for policy making and for the delivery of services that define daily life, such as health care, education, public transport, security, and culture. In addition, some regions have fiscal powers that afford them more say over how funds are spent. In many countries, regions are important testing grounds for upcoming national elections and for trying out new models of coalition government. Many regions have also become players in transboundary, European, and international affairs. The importance of the regional level in the western part of Europe is widely recognized, yet what is the status of regions in the post-communist countries of Europe? Moreover, why would the development of regional governments be relevant to observers of twenty-first-century European politics?

For the Czech Republic and other post-communist countries of East Central Europe (ECE), the often-used phrase "return to Europe" is a shorthand way to describe the processes of democratization and marketization and the tendency of these countries to join prestigious clubs, such as NATO and the European Union. Yet, as I explain in the introduction, the Europe to which the countries *sought* to return was a thoroughly "modern" Europe, one focused on *nation-state* sovereignty, *national* identities, and *centralized* political systems, not one where multiple levels of decision making and identity formation are the norm. After four decades of Soviet hegemony and the subordination and even obfuscation of national

interests to the interests of Soviet-led communist internationalism, the countries of ECE after 1989 were understandably eager to spread their national wings. Since then, as processes of democratization and marketization have unfolded, a few of the countries—Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia—have embarked on limited *decentralization* processes. These countries have undertaken territorial and administrative reforms and have introduced regional “self-government,” meaning autonomous regional assemblies elected by universal suffrage. The reasons for these reforms and their consequences for post-communist democracies are the subjects of this study.

NOTES

1. I use the term East Central Europe to denote post-communist countries between German-speaking Europe and the Orthodox Christian countries of the region.
2. Newspaper headline in the Czech Republic after the October 2008 regional elections.
3. Reaction of Pavel Bem, the mayor of Prague, after the same elections.
4. Thirteen out of the fourteen regions held elections, with the Prague regional election following a year later.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the Colby College Social Sciences Division and the Interdisciplinary Studies Division for their support of field research for this project. I would also express my appreciation to Beata Czajkowska and David Skully for their hospitality in Warsaw and Krakow. Finally, invaluable research assistance was provided by a number of my students at Colby, including Pawel Brodalka, Tomasz Zajackowski, Elise Randall, and Stephanie Berger.

Contents

List of Illustrations	ix
Preface	xi
Acknowledgments	xv
Introduction	1
1 A Framework for Understanding Region Building in Post-communist Europe	17
2 Poland: The Leader of the Pack	49
3 The Czech Republic: Reluctant Regionalization	81
4 Slovakia: Belated and Incomplete Regionalization	109
5 Hungary: The Exceptional Case?	133
Conclusion	159
Appendix A Snapshots of Regionalization in Western Europe	183
Appendix B The ECE Regions in the EU	189
Appendix C Voter Turnout for Regional and National Elections	199
Appendix D Election Outcomes by Region and Year	203
Bibliography	211
Index	227
About the Author	235

Illustrations

FIGURE

1	Party Strengths in Regional Assemblies after the 2002 Elections, Compared with the National Parliament (Sejm)	172
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MAPS

2.1	Poland's Historical Regions	66
2.2	Poland's Post-communist Regions	67
3.1	The Fourteen <i>Kraje</i> (NUTS III) of the Czech Republic Grouped by Cohesion Regions (NUTS II)	99
4.1	The Hungarian Minority in Slovakia	117
4.2	The Regions of Slovakia	118
4.3	NUTS II Regions of Slovakia	125
5.1	The Seven NUTS II Regions of Hungary	147
5.2	The Nineteen Hungarian Counties and Budapest	148

TABLES

1.1	Centralization versus Regionalization	38
2.1	The Sixteen Polish Voivodships	50

2.2	National and Ethnic Minority Groups and Their Distribution throughout Poland	51
2.3	Prime Ministers of Poland	58
2.4	The Territorial Division of Poland	68
2.5	Institutions of Self-Government in Poland	71
3.1	The Fourteen Czech <i>Kraje</i>	83
3.2	Political Parties and Centrist/Regionalist Positions in the Czech Republic	93
3.3	Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic	96
3.4	The Assignment of Independent Competences and Delegated Powers	101
3.5	Discretionary Powers of the Regions	102
4.1	The Eight Slovak VUC (Higher Territorial Units)	110
4.2	Main Periods of Administrative-Territorial Organization in Slovakia	113
4.3	Political Parties in Slovakia	122
4.4	Prime Ministers of Slovakia	124
5.1	The Nineteen (plus Budapest) Hungarian <i>Megyek</i>	134
5.2	Prime Ministers of Hungary	139
5.3	Political Parties in Hungary	140
5.4	Administrative, Planning, and Self-Government Units in Hungary	149

TEXTBOX

3.1	Responsibilities of the Regional Self-Governments	103
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Introduction

The consequences of reforms at the subnational level may be immediate and profound. What is at stake, as Andreas Beckmann reminds us, is the relationship between the state and society and the very nature of state authority in post-communist Europe.

The decisions currently being made [in post-communist countries] will decide in future who teaches our children, how our hospitals are run, what incentives are given to our businesses, how far we have to travel to get a birth certificate—and how we will be treated by the official we find across the counter; in short, how responsive government is to our needs. What is being determined is how actively people can and will want to be involved in public affairs (Beckmann 1999).

After the fall of communism, a fundamental debate took place in every ECE country regarding how centralized or decentralized the state should be. These debates raised deep-seated questions about the very nature of democracy. How close or distant from citizens should decision making be? To what extent should diverse viewpoints and preferences be included in the political process? To what degree and at what levels should citizens be active in politics? While questions such as these have been raised since the 1970s in Western Europe and have been answered with various efforts to devolve authority to the regional level, can we assume that citizens in post-communist countries are eager to be actively involved in public affairs? Do people want to bring decision making that affects their lives closer to them? Do they believe that local and regional governments are more likely to produce solutions that more adequately

address their particular needs and resources? And, to put it very simply, if you build it, will they come? Will the introduction of a regional level of self-governance lead to a mobilization of political activity and identity at the regional level? If the political opportunity structure is expanded to include a new regional level, will post-communist societies rediscover—or create new—territorially based identities and cultures? In essence, when post-communist societies envision a “return to Europe,” is it a Europe of strong nation-states or a Europe of strong regions? These aspects of system transformation in post-communist Europe require greater theoretical inquiry and comparative study.

The regional level in ECE, however, has only just begun to receive much attention. One reason is that the first wave of reforms in the early 1990s was primarily focused on the national level, and this initial reform period often emphasized centralized authority. However, a second wave of reform, beginning in the late 1990s, included significant developments at the subnational level. Most notably, in some countries administrative regionalization has occurred, whereby administrative and territorial regions have been introduced; in a few others regional decentralization has resulted in which regional institutions have been created, including self-governments; and in most countries statistical regions, called *Nomenclature des Unités Territoriales pour la Statistique* (NUTS), have been formed according to EU guidelines.¹ Relatively little comparative study has been done of the motivations, the processes, or the outcomes of these changes.

The other reason for the slow awakening of scholarship to regional issues in the post-communist cases has more to do with the persistence of a strong state centrism in democratization studies. Theoretical and empirical work focuses overwhelmingly on national-level actors and their decisions and the development and consolidation of national political and economic institutions. In one representative study, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, Linz and Stepan (1996) identify “stateness” as requisite for the consolidation of democracy, focusing on the capacity of the national bureaucracy and legal system. Yet states distribute power to greater or lesser extents vertically. John Rodden asserts that the “basic structure of governance is being transformed in countries around the world as authority and resources migrate from central to subnational governments” (2004, 481). Moreover, in the global era, states are

not the only actors involved in promoting or implementing democratic practices: subnational, transnational, and nongovernmental actors engage in myriad activities. In the European Union, states are enmeshed in a multilevel governance process where citizens' identities are not only or even primarily focused on the national level. To quote John Newhouse, "Regionalism, whether within or across national borders, is Europe's current and future dynamic" (1997b, 68). Given these realities, it is time to consider the theoretical and empirical significance of the regional level to the "third wave"² of democratization. As I shall argue in this study, for post-communist societies the "return to Europe" suggests more than a shift toward a particular model of political and economic organization; it is also a move toward more diverse patterns of authority, participation, and identity formation. To put it somewhat differently, while the ECE countries may have bargained for a return to "modern" Europe, they have entered a Europe that is increasingly "postmodern" in its institutional and cultural dimensions.

The dearth of regional analysis on post-communist Europe also certainly owes to the fact that the reforms are relatively recent and their outcomes little known or understood, even by inhabitants of those countries. A final reason for the lack of comparative studies is the tendency to perceive the post-communist space as homogeneous. This assumption plagued much research on Eastern Europe before 1990 and remains a problem even today.³

If we assume that regional developments in the western part of Europe can serve as a theoretical and conceptual guide, we can identify several reasons why and when countries undertake territorial reforms and political decentralization. To begin, we might examine pressures "from below," usually from particular groups defined by ethnic, religious, or linguistic features, motivated by a desire to "return to the roots" and a quest for greater distance from and recognition by central authorities and the dominant culture. This bottom-up process may aim merely at greater autonomy for regions or, in the extreme, at separation and complete independence. Thus, *regionalism* is a movement, defined as the "persistence of subnational and transnational differences, identities and commitments,"⁴ that can induce national authorities to *regionalize*, that is, introduce regional territories if none exist and, perhaps, regional self-government. Important to this process was what is known as subnational mobilization, a rather

vague notion that nonetheless suggests a recognition of common interests and, perhaps, a common identity and culture among actors below the national level. Subnational mobilization further requires organization, which in turn is dependent on a political opportunity structure conducive to such activity, as well as access to resources and know-how. As we will see, it is for these reasons that regionalization from below—by subnational civil society mobilization—is less likely in transition settings or new democracies. Not only is civil society in post-communist countries significantly weaker than in liberal democracies (Howard 2003), but the institution-building phase of the transition tended to concentrate political debate and deliberation in central parliaments (Ágh 1998), which contributed to a demobilization of the public after a brief period of activity in 1989/1990. In earlier decades in Western European countries, by contrast, there existed a variety of political actors at various levels, some of whom desired more political autonomy and began to mobilize in competition with centralized actors. The work of Dirk Gerdes in the mid-1980s looked at this process, examining the domestic conflicts and debates that occurred in France, Spain, and Great Britain in the 1970s. For him, regionalism suggests a competition with centralizing tendencies, “an oppositional politicization of cultural, political and/or economic centralization processes that are grounded in a competition between subnational and centrally-organized cultural and political activities” (Gerdes et al. 1987, 527). According to Gerdes’s formulation, regionalism is a type of domestic, territorialized conflict. This approach focuses attention on the carriers of such conflict: the regionalist groups and movements. Gerdes’s approach also recognizes the need to consider the goals and self-identification of such groups or movements. For example, the goal of separatists, such as the ETA Basques, the Corsican underground movement/the FLNC, the Flemish and Walloonist nationalists, or the Scottish National Party, has traditionally been a horizontal separation of power, to be achieved by building a separate, sovereign nation-state. In contrast, the goal of federalistic groups, like those found in southern France, Catalonia, Galicia, and Andalusia, is to establish an independent territorial level for political decision making, in other words, a vertical separation of powers. Whether and how territorial and administrative change is sought depends on the actors and their political interests and goals.

While center-periphery conflicts were significant in Western Europe in the postwar period, the advocates of decentralization were found not only in the periphery. Indeed, a variety of players, including political parties and interest groups at both the national and subnational level, took a new interest in how state power was distributed and, more specifically, what manner of decision making was most appropriate for the vitality of the economy and the quality of democracy. While one might expect the interests of political elites at the center to be centralist, it was not always so straightforward; in some cases they

were also interested in changing the composition of the local political elite, replacing the old notables, concerned with distribution and support-building, with new types who would be more policy-minded and committed to development and change (Keating 1998, 56).

Moreover, in Western Europe there was an argument that effective regional planning and development policies

could only effectively be carried through by multi-functional authorities with the political weight of direct election. It was also argued that functional imperatives were leading to the creation of a range of government agencies at the regional level, which needed to be brought together in the interests both of efficiency and of democratic accountability (Ibid., 58).

In the mid-1980s, as many as fifty regional movements were active in Western Europe. Many of these ethnic and/or linguistic regionalisms had deep historical roots in the feudal age or in the experience of empire (as either the dominant or subordinate group).⁵ In recent decades in Spain, Belgium, and the United Kingdom, for instance, national elites agreed to redistribute power, to varying extents, as a way to accommodate regional diversity and to defuse separatism. For snapshots of regionalization in several Western European cases, see Appendix A.

Another way to understand why European states have regionalized is to consider changing economic conditions. Christopher Harvie (1994) uses the term “bourgeois regionalism” to suggest that industrialization and urbanization resulted in the rise or fall of the economic fortunes of some areas of Western Europe and that the more successful and affluent regions had