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<https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8069.8.3.08>

Book review

Genov, Nikolai. 2010. *Global Trends in Eastern Europe*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate

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This impressive piece of sociological work starts with the assumption that the demise of Eastern Europe, as a globally acting regional power, had come as a surprise for most of the experts who used to believe that the Cold War was not supposed to end soon. It was hardly foreseen that the dismantling of bipolar power balance could rather take place in a peaceful manner than due to atrocity of a nuclear war. Soviet Union was for long perceived as a guarantee of stability in the region.

Nikolai Genov begins his analysis with questions about the reasons and the consequences for the above-mentioned occurrences. The leading thesis of his analysis concerns the fact that the relative isolation of Eastern Europe from global trends is vanishing since the end of the 80's. Genov enumerates four main global trends which influenced the process of transformation in the region: "upgrading the rationality of organizational," "individualization," "spread of instrumental activism" and "universalization of value-normative systems." Probably, there are many possible ways to operationalize these processes otherwise. Yet, the strat-

egy chosen by the author, consistently applied in the whole book, proves its sufficiency.

Partially, the book constitutes a continuation of the past decade's work – *Managing Transformations in Eastern Europe* – which summarizes the first decennary of transitions in post-communist Europe. The author claims that the consecutive years (2000-2008) have become the success story of globalization in the region:

[t]he GDP growth of most Eastern European societies reached and exceeded their GDP level before the changes. The economic recovery was accompanied by the stabilization of political institutions. ... The value-normative reintegration celebrated real achievements. Millions of Eastern Europeans could enjoy the rise in living standards and the practical relevance of universal human rights. ... Eastern Europe had joined the achievements of globalization but also the global accumulation of tensions and conflicts. (p. xii)

The book is clearly structured and is broken down into 6 chapters. While the first one introduces the main problems and discusses the author's theoretical inspirations, the subsequent four chapters are devoted to the analysis of each of the above-mentioned global trends. The volume is concluded with the chapter "Conceptualizing Social Dynamics" which, while referring, again, to the crucial theoretical inspirations and briefly bringing the previous elaborations to an end, mainly aims at posing further questions and conceptualizing frame for further agenda for the research that would not only be relevant for studying contemporary social processes but would also enhance the development of high-quality social science.

The introductory chapter, "Globalization and Regional Development: Social Reality and Social Sci-

ence Concepts," provides an interesting debate on existing conceptualizations of both the global trends in a most broad perspective and the various approaches to the Eastern European transition. Concerning the first problem, the author utilizes concepts of partially forgotten (or, at least, rarely applied in contemporary studies) classics, like Talcott Parsons, to elaborate on Soviet style of modernization occurring within the Eastern bloc. For the latter, he provides plausible critique of various theoretical conceptualizations within transitology studies. The reflection on both the condition of social sciences and the usability of various conceptual and theoretical frameworks in approaching these issues is present in the author's argumentation throughout the whole book, making the condition of social sciences another, implicit, yet very important topic. In his book Nikolai Genov utilizes the massive amount of information for the purpose of quantitative study of data from both primary (originating from research projects he participated in) and secondary resources (from multiple statistical databases), as well as for a deep, qualitative insight into some of the analyzed phenomena.

Interestingly, the concepts of social sciences giants, like Max Weber or Emile Durkheim, appear to be considered not only as "obligatory" references but as currently functional theoretical inspirations, what is not common nowadays.

The author proves his gift of offering not only the precise analytical insight but also comprehensive argumentation. Taking into account various partial empirical data, he draws well informed coverage referring to the broader context. This could be exemplified by his comparisons made between Poland and Bulgaria, provided in the first chapter. Description of differences between both of these

countries throughout the Cold War period paves the way for argumentation referring to the course of transition which begun with the collapse of Iron Curtain. The analysis points at the complexity of factors interfering in the process which, despite the similar neoliberal pathway of transition, provided significantly different outcomes in both of these country-cases. This comparison serves here to elucidate the multidimensionality of transformation and pose questions about variety of global trends' adaptations in the Eastern European reality. Weaknesses and failures regarding the process at hand are mainly caused by various path-dependencies, institutional defects or poor decision-making, but might also be embedded in the nature of global trends influencing the region previously intractable, to some extent, to their overwhelming impact.

The second chapter, "Upgrading the Rationality of Organizations and Organizational Pathologies," like the previous one, begins with the reference to the classical sociological debate (namely between the Frankfurt School and the Popperians) and continues with the precise description of organizational transitions and logic of rationalizations of various processes in Eastern Europe (for example, industrialization, privatization, structural adjustments to the European Union accession, and so on) throughout the socialist period in the past two decades.

The third chapter, entitled "Individualization versus Common Good," is particularly illuminative. Apart from quite obvious topics, like protest movements in Eastern Europe, Genov undertakes the biographies of prominent political actors (Boris Yeltsin, Lech Wałęsa, Václav Havel), in order to discuss the three different, but, at the same time, typical, cases of political elite transformation in the

post-Soviet reality. Reconstructions of these three leaders pathways is detailed and the author's argumentation is plausible. In the next sub-chapter the author undertakes completely different theme, elaborating on transition from collectivism to individualism via analysis of architectural design and housing policies, and their ideological backgrounds in progress of socialism and post-socialist transformation. This is just one of many examples of the author's multidimensional expertise within the study. Nowadays, when many sociologists tend to concentrate on a narrow and separate research fields withholding from bridging various perspectives and utilizing different theoretical approaches, this kind of bottom-up approach, which, at the end, enables some wider generalizations referring to structural and global processes, seems particularly valuable.

Given that issues and processes described in this book are significantly broader than respective chapter's titles suggest, the contents page might be slightly misleading as a spectrum of elaborated problems. For example, this is exemplified with the fourth chapter, entitled "Instrumental Activism and Sustainability," in which a very broad scope of topics is covered. The author discusses the mishaps of commercialization during the socialist times, in order to combine them with the uncritical neoliberal euphoria, dominating public discourse, embracing the commercialization processes throughout the transition period. Particularly bitter conclusions might be drawn from the paragraphs elaborating on the technological underdevelopment in Eastern Europe, subsequently deepen by dramatic under-investment of R&D in the course of the 90' and later on. Given that due to presented data the share of high technology export with regard to the

whole export in Poland is the lowest amongst all of the post-socialist EU member states, this case is especially worrying. The situation at hand is, at least partially, caused by the lack of public funding for the R&D; what represents the kind of shortsighted policy, which will, most likely, cause further severe damages to the national economy. However, Genov argues that nowadays, when most of potentially innovative branches of economy are owned by foreign investors who are not interested in facilitating cooperation with the Polish R&D development sector, even the increase of such an investments would still be insufficient. Therefore, stimulation of capacities for absorbing high-tech products by national economy seems to be a key task to increase competitiveness of economy in high-tech branches. Sustainability, itemized in this chapter's title, is understood here very broadly. Referring to societal cohesion, Genov analyzes a wide range of topics, for example, unemployment, growing income polarization, housing problems, consequences of growing commercialization of educational and health care sector, paying particular attention to the issues of organizational cultures and complicated transformation of institutional arrangements within the countries under scrutiny.

The fifth chapter, "Universalization and Particularisms in the Value-normative Systems," utilizes a great amount of data originating from various studies on axiological orientations of Eastern European societies. One of the strengths of this part of the study draws from the in-depth analysis of the Balkan wars and their legacies for the Southern Europe.

As the author utilizes plenty of resources and empirical data, including those originating from the numerous research projects he coordinated or

participated in, traditional borders between sociological sub-disciplines and research approaches seem to be invalid further to his book. Yet, as the selection of arguments and concepts from sociological repertoire was purposefully adapted to the specificity of studied phenomena, this eclecticism, bridging multitude of information and variety of approaches, leaves no impression of chaos. Applying this kind of approach demanded professional courage and self-confidence from the author who must have proven his proficiency with regard to such a broad span of topics and sociological approaches.

The book offers clear structure and persuasive reasoning, not without sophistication, but, as it is coherent and clearly written, not only professionals in the field of social sciences could enjoy it. As a decent share of the author's effort was devoted to study the specific case of our country, not without applying thought-provoking comparative perspectives, Polish readers shall be among those most interested in this work. Nikolai Genov manages to prove that classical sociological concepts could still be well adapted to the study on multitudinous, inter-winning societal transformations; strategy at hand requires, however, excellent expertise and scrupulous approach to the variety of analyzed data.

Nevertheless, despite the accuracy of data and the excellence of analysis, it was impossible to avoid some simplifications or minor errors while presenting so many data regarding multidimensional processes in such a compacted form. For a Polish reader, one of particularly striking blunders occurs on page 105 where the author mistakenly claims that in 1995, while serving Prime Minister, Aleksander Kwaśniewski became Lech Wałęsa's adversary in the presidential campaign. In reality,

the period between 1993 and 1997, when a coalition government of Democratic Left Alliance and Polish People's Party was formed, witnessed three Prime Ministers: Waldemar Pawlak, Józef Oleksy and Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz. Aleksander Kwaśniewski, being unquestionable leader of Polish post-communist left, has never been fulfilling this duty. This mistake might be regarded as quite indicative for Polish political tradition since the beginning of the 90's. Apart from cabinets of Leszek Miller (2001-2004), Donald Tusk (2007-2012) and a short spell of Jarosław Kaczyński (2006-2007), the main position in the government was not held by the leader, most important and

influential politician of a winning party, but by his nominee.

Nevertheless, the book is an excellent thought-provoking reading, proving the author's impressive gift of wide-ranging analytical approach to structural processes or global trends, without neglecting the bottom-up perspective. It provides plenty of illuminative data and could well serve both as a source of information indispensable while undertaking any kind of comparative study on a transformation in a region of Europe, and as a decent handbook on the transformations in Eastern Europe throughout the last two decades.

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● **Citation**

● Woźniak, Wojciech. 2012. „Book review Genov, Nikolai. 2010. *Global Trends in Eastern Europe*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.” *Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej* 8(3):116-120. Retrieved Month, Year ([http://www.przegladsocjologiijako-](http://www.przegladsocjologiijakoosciowej.org)
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