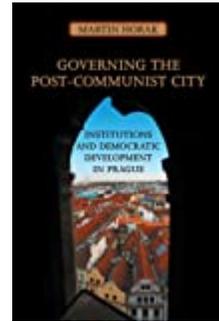




Martin Horak. *Governing the Post-Communist City: Institutions and Democratic Development in Prague.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007. xii + 270 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8020-9328-8.



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Institutional Change and Local Government Performance in Prague

In *Governing the Post-Communist City* Martin Horak examines and assesses the performance of democratic local government in the first decade of post-communist Prague (1990-2000). In his analysis, Horak considers, among other dimensions, the process through which policies are produced, the degree of openness in the policy process, the ability to govern systematically, and the input from societal actors. The decision to use a local case and a holistic perspective to study post-communist politics proves wise as it allows a better understanding of post-communist transformations than would have been possible through a national case study.

The book is organized into six chapters focused on two main research questions: 1) what impacts did the nature of the decision-making environment have on the behavior of political leaders in early post-communist Prague; and 2) what were the longer-term effects of this decision-making behavior? Horak argues, in the first case, that Prague's local politicians reacted to their unstable and institutionally incoherent environment by seeking simple, short-term solutions in key areas of urban

policy. In the second case, his argument is that increasing returns processes were responsible for the maintenance of Prague's mix of institutional forms, which were created by decisions taken during the early post-communist period. Two different policy areas are examined: freeways construction and the management of Prague's historical center.

In chapter 1, Horak offers an introductory account of institutional changes and government performance in post-communist Prague and a characterization of the early post-communist decision-making environment. He discusses different theoretical perspectives and presents the arguments that in his opinion make the historical-institutionalist approach the appropriate framework to analyze influences on the performance of post-communist local governments. However, in his analysis, the author avoids some of the difficulties that affect institutional design perspectives, namely the premise that there is a "best practice" in democracy-building that can be applied in different historical contexts. The chapter also includes a methodological section.

In the following chapter (“The Structure of Government in Prague: Building a Strong Local State”), the author compares the case of Prague’s contemporary local government with that of other post-communist countries and cities in East Central Europe (e.g., Hungary and Poland) and explores the factors responsible for the differences between Prague and other major cities in this area. He focuses on the conditions that made Prague an untypical East Central European municipality, in the last centuries and during the period of communist rule, including the fact that it has been one of the most fiscally powerful cities in the region, which, as Horak shows, was also influential in the rebirth of local self-government. For Horak, Prague developed, in the first years after 1989, one of the best-organized local governments in East Central Europe, a form of local self-government with greater autonomy from central government than was common at that time in these countries. His analysis is well informed by detailed historical and legal data, and the reader, even if not familiar with the history of Czechoslovakia and the city of Prague (which after the country’s split into separate Czech and Slovak republics in 1993, continued to serve as the capital of the former), will certainly be able to follow the analysis and his arguments. In sum, post-communist municipal government in Prague developed a strong base of powers and resources, in part due to its historical background (e.g., past metropolitan government experience, ownership of large segments of urban property, extensive network of administrative bodies, etc.). In other words, the evidence provided shows that historical variables in the transition to democratic local government were a key driver in Prague, and while a strong state is a necessary condition for good government performance, at the municipal level it is not sufficient and other conditions need to be present, including administrative structures, legal frameworks, a well-established political party system, and active urban stakeholders.

And since these different variables change at different velocities, it is not surprising that, in the case of post-communist Prague, the new democratic local councilors had to work within a context that combined old and new political institutions and practices. This facet is well exemplified by Horak in chapter 3 (“Institutions and Political Actors in Early Post-Communist Prague”), in which he examines the mixed political environment prevailing in post-communist Prague, made up of old and new political institutions, and how this combination affected the decision-making process and the behavior of political leaders, explaining why and how local government in Prague, despite the favorable conditions, had very poor

performance. As he correctly argues, a strong (local) state provides the basic conditions for good governance, but this is not enough since other institutional elements and local stakeholders also shape local government performance. In the case of post-communist Prague, institutional inconsistency and the unbalanced nature of the local political system created a background for decision-making that favored short-term politics instead of long-range planning.

The consequences of this short-term approach in two specific policy fields are examined and discussed in the two following chapters. In chapter 4 (“Planning and Developing the Main Road Network: The Politics of Mutual Delegation”), Horak examines the politics of freeways development in Prague, linking the weak government performance in the transport policy field to the character of the decision-making environment. In chapter 5 (“Preservation and Development in Prague’s Historic Core: The Politics of Profit”), the book offers a similar conclusion. In both fields, local policy in Prague was developed within a professionalized and technocratic approach, without important inputs from civil-society stakeholders, although in the case of the historic center there was ample citizen support, which was not the case in the freeways construction process. The empirical evidence provided in these two chapters suggests that a more open local government in Prague and a policy approach with a long-range perspective will require the deconstruction of embedded political and administrative practices built in the first decade of post-communist local government.

Finally, in chapter 6 (“Institutional Change and Government Performance: Lessons from Prague”), Horak summarizes the contribution of his research to our understanding of post-communist transformations. Contrary to some predictions, the basic formal elements of a democratic local government were all well established by the end of the first decade of democracy in Prague. However, the same cannot be said about the capacity of local government to implement policy decisions. For Horak, excessive democratic openness is not one of the factors responsible for this pattern, as some local politicians tend to argue, since the evidence provided in the book clearly shows that the political system in Prague was made largely behind closed doors, ad hoc, and was marked by a lack of openness to civil-society interests and influence. As Horak emphasizes, decisions made in the early years did not determine all aspects of later developments but did in fact influence the way decisions were taken, and only in special circumstances has it been

possible to change established processes and procedures and introduce innovation in the local political system.

Overall, Martin Horak's book offers ample data, first, that it is useful to combine different theoretical perspectives (e.g., the institutional design approach and the legacies approach) in order to capture the subtle characteristics and differences of post-communist transformation in East Central Europe; and, second, that past social and cultural legacies influence but do not determine the present, constituting instead a framework for political and administrative action. If basic state structures greatly influence political outcomes, as they shape roles, responsibilities, decision-making powers, and resources available for local politicians, the evidence from Prague indicates that this influence is exerted within a much broader network of urban stakeholders.

In sum, Horak sees the process of post-communist transformation of local government in Prague as distinct from a linear process, since it seems to be the result of continuous and uneven interactions between the legacies of the past and the institutional and political choices made in the present by democratically elected politicians, a perspective that most readers will probably share at

the end of the book. Nonetheless, I would recommend precaution on any generalization based on this single case study, since, as Horak suggests, the post-communist transformation process in Prague is, to some degree, different from what occurred in other cities in East Central Europe. More comparative research on urban development and urban planning among cities in East Central Europe seems necessary before generalizations can be made. It would also be interesting to compare these processes in East Central Europe with those that occurred in southern Europe (Portugal and Spain) at the end of 1970s and in the early 1980s during the transition from authoritarian political regimes to democracy, where the interplay between past political and administrative legacies interacted and conditioned institutional and political choices made in the early years of democratic rule, namely in the field of urban policies. For all these reasons, this is a book that will be of interest to all those concerned with urban history and urban planning history in particular. The lessons from Prague will certainly be useful for researchers working on East Central European post-communist transformation processes, and on urban planning history and urban governance in other parts of the world as well.

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