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The quality of democracy in Europe: Soviet illegitimacy and the negotiated revolutions of 1989

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Abstract

The 'Quality of Democracy' is a meta-level research programme, the rise of which is tied to the events of 1989 in a structural and ideational sense. Democracy, as a concept, has spread widely and external threats have become almost non-existent. Thus, research of democracy has turned inward in attempting to appraise its quality. Upon examination, however, it is clear that the research programme falls short of its promise. It is insufficiently comparative both conceptually and historically. Proponents seem captivated by the 'end of history' narrative in their adherence to a single standard 'liberal' democratic quality by which all regimes are assessed and ranked. Symptomatically, observers both East and West imagine Eastern European democracies as backsliding, claiming that new democracies must be externally assisted. Singular notions of good democracy lead to poor research.

Consequently, it is suggested that the 'Quality of Democracy' research programme must become more reflexive. Methodologically, this implies a reckoning with the different types of democratic substance and procedure that exist as ideas and institutions. With regard to 1989, it is argued that the key to understanding the transition to democracy and the failures of democratization in Eastern Europe lies in, firstly, reckoning with the Soviet legacy; and, secondly, establishing whether a negotiated revolution occurred or not. In conclusion, the foundations for an analysis of the institutional types of Eastern European procedure and substance are offered. Thus, a historical and comparative analysis of the quality of democracy in Europe is outlined.

Keywords

Quality of Democracy, comparative politics, Eastern Europe, Soviet illegitimacy, negotiated revolution, constitutional reform