Review on the thesis Subnational Governance in the Czech Republic: Challenges and Opportunities for the Democratic and Administrative Reform

Jakub Lysek is one of the prominent young figures of Czech political science. I have been following his work with interest for about the last six years. During this period, he has developed not only as a methodology expert with strong expertise in statistical analysis of quantitative data, but also as a specialist on local governance and electoral processes. The habilitation thesis under review focuses precisely on this part of Lysek's scholarly expertise.

All the articles that make up the thesis have gone through rigorous peer review in reputable international journals, which in itself is a solid guarantee of scientific quality. In this review, I will assess their contribution to Czech political science and, from my own perspective, critically discuss their strengths and weaknesses. I will then provide an overall evaluation of how the author has framed these works through a unifying introduction.

The first article deals with the issue of municipal splits. The topic is rather unusual — political science typically focuses much more on processes of consolidation and municipal mergers, which usually result from top-down reforms. Lysek recognizes (and I agree with his assessment) that such consolidation is currently unlikely in the Czech Republic, even though Czech municipalities are among the smallest in Europe. Research into the causes of municipal splits within such a highly fragmented system can also be read as an answer to the question of why small municipalities resist merging. The author shows that economic factors and perceptions of injustice and underinvestment stood behind most breakups. Although the study is based on only a few cases, its findings probably also illuminate why most small municipalities would resist being merged into larger units. Concerns about spatial injustice may be an important root of Czech resistance to amalgamation.

The second article examines the dynamics of the number of municipal employees in statutory cities and shows that growth in administrative staff is associated with political fragmentation of city leadership and with changes in political positions. The focus of this article is quite unique — I am not aware of other Czech studies on this topic. However, I am not entirely convinced by the author's interpretation of the observed relationships. He infers that clientelism and patronage are taking place in the examined cities. While I agree with the general conclusion that the political context plays an important role in shaping the size and structures of the bureaucratic staff, the analysis does not fully convince me that the author has demonstrated a significant influence of patronage and efforts to cement political positions through expansion of the bureaucracy. To make such a claim, it might have been necessary to focus more on top administrative positions rather than on all municipal employees, and to explore the issue more deeply using qualitative data. I also have some doubts about the author's argument that under fiscal stress, cities are likely to reduce bureaucratic staff. It could be expected that the provision of public services in times of crisis would not decrease, and might even increase, which would not allow staff reduction. I would also recommend a more critical examinations of the argument that "post-communist administrations are affected by widespread patronage and clientelism" (p.45). I am afraid that generalising arguments on democratic malfunctions inherited from the communism period can easily be misleading.

The third article addresses the Europeanization of Czech subnational politics. The author argues that municipalities have been strengthened through Europeanization and have become significant partners of the central government, whereas the regions have not experienced a similar empowerment. This is an interesting finding that opens possibilities for further research. Personally, I find it very challenging to summarize twenty years of EU membership from the perspective of regional and local politics in a

single article. A major strength of the piece is that the author recognizes how the political and institutional environment has evolved during this period, and that the effects of Europeanization have been significantly modified by these domestic changes.

The fourth, fifth, and sixth articles deal with the electoral system and voting behaviour. This topic is considerably more developed within Czech political science than the themes of the previous three articles. However, the focus of these papers is unique and offers entirely new insights.

The fourth article examines the number of candidates in municipal elections. The authors note the well-documented fact that an increasing number of municipalities lack genuine electoral competition because voters "have no choice." They show that these uncontested elections significantly reduce voter turnout. The key finding, however, is that the degree of turnout decline varies across municipalities and is shaped by municipal size, education level, and age structure. These interactions allow for theorizing about the mechanisms that explain the drop in participation in "silent elections." The distinction between the resource-based model and the habitual voting model offers a convincing theoretical explanation for the observed statistical relationships.

The fifth article also deals with electoral participation, this time from the perspective of concurrent elections. The authors convincingly demonstrate that the coincidence of two second-order elections does not necessarily increase turnout; on the contrary, it increases the number of invalid votes. The analysis is conducted very persuasively, skillfully exploiting the quasi-experimental situation created by the regular overlap of municipal or regional elections with Senate elections in some Czech municipalities. Among the included articles, I consider this contribution the strongest.

The sixth article focuses on selective voting behaviour, where some voters participate in municipal but not parliamentary elections. This is a theoretically very interesting topic, as some voters seem to act contrary to the logic of second-order election theory. Using survey data, the author shows what characterizes such voters and argues that the local political arena can serve as a protective factor supporting democratic attitudes. A certain empirical weakness of this study is the author's difficulty in reliably identifying respondents who repeatedly vote only in municipal elections. Such identification should not be based solely on information from the most recent parliamentary and municipal elections.

I appreciate the way the author framed this collection of studies with a unifying introduction. The introduction highlights not only the academic significance of each article but also their implications for the Czech local government system and its potential reforms — for instance, proposals for deeper decentralization of governance in statutory cities or for stronger formalization of Local Action Groups (LAGs). Each of these reform proposals could of course be debated, which is natural given their inherently political nature. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that the author's proposals are grounded in a very solid understanding of the municipal environment and deserve attention.

I will, however, add one critical note regarding the introduction. The author formulates some of his claims rather ambitiously — which is not necessarily a flaw in academic work — but in some places I would suggest more cautious phrasing. For example, on page 8 he claims that all articles "focus on causal explanations." A careful reading of the individual studies shows that causality is not always convincingly demonstrated empirically. Proving causality in the social sciences is always extremely challenging. Similarly, on page 18 the author states that "to date, only nine studies have examined the effects of concurrently held elections." In fact, this topic is not quite so unique and has been studied more frequently.

As a whole, I evaluate the submitted habilitation thesis very positively. It fully demonstrates the author's deep expertise in the field of local government studies and qualifies him for the award of the title *docent* (associate professor).

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