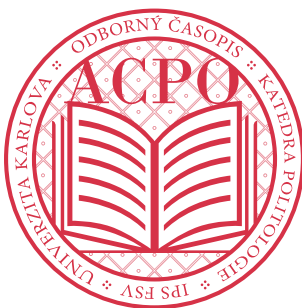


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RECENZE MICHALA MALÉHO
REVIEW FROM MICHAL MALÝ

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Tento článek podléhá autorským právům, kopírování a využívání jeho obsahu bez řádného odkazování na něj je považováno za plagiátorství a podléhá sankcím dle platné legislativy.

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Katedra politologie Institutu politologických studií
Fakulta sociálních věd Univerzity Karlovy

Department of Political Science, Institute of Political Studies
Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University

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The central theme of the reviewed book, a relatively new work on the political science scene, is the connection between the “personalisation” of politics (marked by a radical shift from collective to individual actors and institutions) and the stability of democracy. Other authors have shown how the foundations of democracy were shaken by the COVID-19 pandemic – autocratization accelerated and democracy declined worldwide (V-Dem Institute, 2021). Fortunato Musella connects aspects of political personalisation with the behaviour of individual actors and observes specifically how certain institutional aspects of the functioning of given democratic institutions, primarily parliaments, changed during the pandemic. He introduces a new term to describe this pandemic democratic shift – “monocratic government”. A monocratic government is a state whose prime minister or president becomes the primary representative in politics. This heightened dominance manifests in the government’s and ruling political party’s operations. The third sign is the dominance of the government office, which dominates the parliament and other components balancing political power. The author focuses on Italy, Hungary, France, Great Britain, Spain, Germany, and the USA and examines whether these countries are moving towards a monocratic government.

The book is divided into seven chapters, the first two of which are dedicated to developing a theoretical approach to studying the personalisation of politics and monocratic governance. Therein, the author describes the current state of research in both categories and provides their synthesis – thus constructing the theoretical basis for the book. The remaining five chapters empirically examine monocratic tendencies in the studied countries. These tendencies

are discussed, for example, according to the number of executive decrees and parliamentary legislative initiatives recorded during the pandemic, and the increase of supporters on social networks. The book brings relatively new approaches to the study of political science that enable the analysis of fairly current social processes, primarily connected with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on politics, especially within the parliamentary arena. It examines the impact of the need to respond objectively and promptly to the pandemic brought (or brought to life) tools and processes geared towards increasing the speed and efficiency of political decision-making.

In the book’s third chapter, the author focuses on the ratio of government and parliament legislative proposals. The case study in this analysis is Italy. Here, the percentage of parliamentary proposals gradually increased. The author explains this gradual increase as resulting from the large number of MPs who changed parties or founded their own during the election period and concludes that a greater degree of parliamentary fragmentation leads to a greater degree of parliamentary legislative proposals.

In the fourth chapter, the author focuses on the authority of prime ministers/presidents to use executive decrees (the name of this authority differs in the constitutions of individual states). The chapter shows that the increase in the use of this authority was significant in four of the studied countries, most visibly in Hungary, where executive decrees increased by almost 40%. A considerable increase was also observed in France, where they increased by nearly 20%. The use of executive decrees reduces the ability of parliament to act, as the legislative branch is practically bypassed by this step and thus loses its essential function.

The fifth chapter focuses on digital platforms and their influence on communications during the COVID-19 pandemic. With the development of the Internet, the space for politicians to address voters dramatically expanded: Politicians no longer need to rely on traditional media to spread their messages. The current digital age offers an ever-wider range of communication platforms, the most used of which are Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. The phenomenon of direct communication between leaders and the electorate via social media, bypassing traditional media, is not new (prior to COVID-19 period, it was championed by then President Donald J. Trump, especially on Twitter). However, according to the author, the use of such platforms increased sharply during the pandemic among top political figures, as evidenced by their increased number of followers on social networks. (In some cases, important government information also appeared on social media before it was released on official communication channels.)

The sixth chapter concentrates on the possibility of declaring a state of emergency and the frequency of use of this tool. A state of emergency gives a prime minister/president more opportunities to bypass parliament. Combined with the possibility of constitutional decrees, these are very potent powers. Nevertheless, historically minimal use of this tool can be observed in the monitored cases. The only exception was the USA, where the use of the state of emergency increased rapidly during the Trump administration. The book closes by examining data by V-Dem Institute and Freedom House showing that in both their democratic indices, the quality of democracy decreased during the pandemic, especially in Hungary and the USA.

The weaknesses of the reviewed work are two-fold – conceptual and methodological. Conceptually, recent work by Guasti and Bustikova (2022) focused on a similar phenomenon, the ‘pandemic power grab’

– a form of executive aggrandizement (Bermeo, 2016). Guasti and Bustikova call for a distinction between democratic erosion/backsliding during and because of the pandemic. The earlier is the main focus of the extant literature – the correlation between the strengthening of the executive and the erosion of democratic quality is not identical to the causal link between the pandemic power grab and democratic backsliding. The reviewed book does not distinguish conceptually between democratic decline during the pandemic and due to the pandemic, which partially limits the generalization potential of the book.

Case selection is another issue. The USA and Hungary have already been analyzed in many previous studies, and the fact that these countries showed increased authoritarian tendencies is also not new – the process started before the pandemic (cf. Guasti and Bustikova, 2022 for Hungary; Weyland, 2020, for the USA). Expanding the number of cases to include countries from Eastern Europe or Scandinavia, for example, could reveal “covid practices” that do not manifest themselves in Western Europe.

Notwithstanding the two outlined weaknesses, the reviewed book is an exciting contribution to current research dealing with democracy after the COVID-19 pandemic. The book provides interesting methodological tools for this type of research and can serve as an inspiration. Furthermore, connecting the phenomenon of the personalisation of politics with the quality of democracy is also productive. As the conclusion of the book shows, the increase in political personalisation brings more attention to the ruling person, who gains a vast media space. However, this gradually moves the country towards a monocratic government, which from the author’s point of view, is not entirely optimistic.

Overall, the book can be recommended to researchers dealing with the personali-

sation of politics or democracy or anyone seeking a basic overview of possible transformations of democratic systems after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Michal Malý¹

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¹ Mgr. Michal Malý is a Ph.D. candidate at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University (Pekařská 16, 158 00 Praha 5). E-mail: 76872667@fsv.cuni.cz. ResearcherID: GXF-9941-2022. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4782-2672>.