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8 December 2013

Dear Sir/Madam

**Re: Andrew L. Roberts *The Quality of Democracy in Eastern Europe***

I am writing this report on *The Quality of Democracy in Eastern Europe: Public Preferences and Policy Reforms* (Cambridge University Press, 2009) by Andrew L. Roberts which has been submitted as a habilitation thesis at Masaryk University, Brno.

The work deals with the concept of 'democratic quality' and the empirical measurement and assessment of levels of democratic quality in contemporary Central and Eastern Europe. The notion of 'democratic quality' has become common over the past decade in the study of both new and established democracies. However, as this work notes, the concept remains a fuzzy and ill-defined one - scholars, who have used the notion, have tended to define it in three ways: 1) superabundance of the basic components that make up the procedural minimum of liberal democracy; 2) a set of favourable social and cultural prerequisites standing outside the political system; or 3) a set of desirable or efficiently produced policy outcomes promoting the public good,

loosely overlapping with the concept of 'good governance' championed by many international organizations and NGOs.

The book argues that all of the above approaches are unsatisfactory either because they conflate the attributes of high quality democracy with those of democracy in general, or because they confuse democratic quality with things such as social structures or policy outputs which, strictly speaking, fall outside citizen-politician relationship at the core of representative democracy.

Democratic quality, Roberts suggests, must instead be understood in terms citizens' abilities to influence their rulers through three forms of linkage: 1) electoral accountability (voters' ability to dismiss politicians, who have broken promises or performed unsatisfactorily); 2) mandate accountability (voters' ability to make meaningful choices from a range of distinct programmatic positions) – and politicians' willingness and ability to deliver on campaign promises; and 3) policy responsiveness (politicians' willingness when in office to fit policy to public opinion – and voters' ability to monitor and pressurize them to do so).

The book then seeks to operationalise and measure democratic quality (thus defined) across the new EU member states of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), which were considered to be stable and functioning liberal democracies, but also to have consolidated democracy in a flawed and low quality form burdened by legacies of the communist past, a detached and alienated citizenry, and a corrupt and self-serving political class.

In successive chapters the book then uses a mix of quantitative analysis and re-analysis of existing literature assesses electoral accountability, mandate accountability and policy responsiveness in CEE. Comparisons are then drawn between these findings and previous studies of democratic linkage in both established West European democracies and the new democracies of Latin America. The book then further investigates policy responsiveness through comparative case studies of the pension and housing reform in the Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary.

Based on data on economic performance, Roberts finds that CEE democracies showed high level of electoral responsiveness. Despite significant general anti-incumbent voting, voters in the region did hold governments to account for poor economic performance. However, although many CEE party systems were programmatically structured, mandate accountability in the region was much weaker – and, Roberts argues in this work, has remained consistently weak since the fall of communism. Party positions in the region are less clear and – usually as result of a politics of populist outbidding - the range of party positions tends to be less varied than in either Western Europe or Southern Europe. Examining politicians' follow-through on campaign promises, Roberts finds that the relationship between winning parties' campaign promises on (economic)

reform and the subsequent direction of policy to be weak, although they are were blatant *volte faces* on reform commitments of the kind common in Latin America.

However, contrary to the image of 'lonely reformers' by-passing popular preferences through blame avoidance strategies, Roberts finds that, when making policy, CEE politicians were relatively responsive to public opinion. Although there is little active public input into policy making, qualitative case studies of pension and housing reform in Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic presented in the book highlight how favourable public opinion w been a key prerequisite for reforms to go ahead.

Overall, Roberts argues, CEE enjoys a reasonable quality of democracy, albeit democracy characterised by distinct, lopsided patterns of accountability. Weak civil societies, constraints imposed on left and right imposed by international and European conditionalities and CEE voters' tendency to punish all incumbents at the polls, reducing politicians' incentives to fulfil campaign promises, sharply depresses mandate accountability, Roberts suggests. The region's surprisingly good democratic quality, juxtaposition with Western Europe and Latin America suggests, can be traced to a single factor: its relatively high levels of socio-economic development and, in consequence, its well educated, capable and rational citizenries.

*The Quality of Democracy in Eastern Europe* offers an elegant, rigourous and generally convincing set of arguments about how we should view democracy in CEE, which cuts through much conceptual confusion and opens to way to genuinely pan-European comparison of democratic systems in the old and new EU.

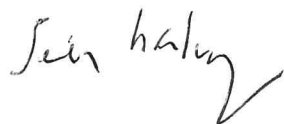
The empirical basis of book's findings is, in some respects, limited and its theoretical formulations leave some questions unaddressed. Its stress on citizen-state linkages as at the heart of quality might, for example, imply that forms of direct democracy (unmentioned in the book) offer better quality democracy. Aspects of the book's analysis would also need revisiting in the light 'earthquake elections' in two of the three case study countries and an apparent drift towards illiberal democracy in Hungary.

Such limitations, however, arguably reflect a concern with broad agenda-setting, rather than making cast iron, empirical judgements over narrow range of cases and – from a regional comparative perspective – it is evident that much of the book's key observations offer an excellent basis for diagnosing the current malaise of democracy in CEE.

Overall the book is conceptually rich, wide-ranging in scope and intellectual ambition and intriguing in its empirical findings. As such in my view as among the best and most original pieces of comparative political research on Central and Eastern Europe published in English in the last five years. Accordingly, on the

basis of this work, I would have no hesitation in recommending that you continue with the habilitation process for Andrew L. Roberts.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Seán Hanley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Dr Seán Hanley,  
Senior Lecturer in Comparative Central and East European Politics