

The Research Committee of Legislative Specialists and East-West Research on Post-Communist Parliaments: A Decade-Long Relationship

The sudden collapse of communism in Central Europe, soon followed by the disintegration of the USSR and Yugoslavia, opened unimaginable opportunities for both the development of new democratic legislatures and for the disciplined study of those legislatures.

Scholarship on both sides of the Iron Curtain was equally unprepared. No body of empirical research on communist legislatures existed in the communist states, with the notable but also unique Polish exceptions in the fields of sociology and law. The prevailing attitude among legislative specialists in the West was, 'why bother to study communist legislatures when there is nothing there?'

With the sudden collapse of communist rule, there was much we needed to know about immediately, but for which no knowledge was obtainable. This 'we' refers to both the position of scholarship that existed in the west and the potential and aspiring scholarship in Central Europe.

The Research Committee of Legislative Specialists (RCLS) of the International Political Science Association quickly became an organisational medium through which social scientists from both the East and the West could find each other and begin to work and think together about a very new, but immediately also very large and important subject matter – the legislatures of post-communist states.

The RCLS effort was publicised through conferences and publications. A series of RCLS conferences in Paris (1993), Budapest and Ljubljana (1996), and Budapest and Ljubljana (1998) resulted in a 'Working Paper' series with participants and materials from around the world, but with a special emphasis on observing the unfolding drama in the early stages of the new democratic political systems.

Participants in the RCLS came from many of the post-communist states, including the post-Soviet states. One of the hopes of the organisers of each conference was that the new social scientists of former communist countries and those from the West would find common topics and projects transcending the boundaries of the former Iron Curtain. An example of both cross-border sponsorship and active intellectual cooperation was the editorial body behind the Working Paper series, which was comprised of Prof. Lawrence Longley from the United States, Prof. Attila Agh from Hungary, and Prof. Drago Zajc from Slovenia. The conferences themselves yielded papers that were subsequently published as articles in the *Journal of Legislative Studies* and then also as books, under the general editorship of Prof. Philip Norton from the United Kingdom.

Two books resulted from special RCLS projects and conferences, and a third is currently under preparation. The first book, which was prepared and edited by Prof. Norton and Prof. David M. Olson (1996), is a monograph on the new post-communist parliaments. The second book focuses on legislative committees and was prepared and edited by Prof. Olson and Prof. William Crowther, both from the United States (2003). Each book was a multi-national collaborative effort. The third volume in this RCLS series will summarise the first decade of post-communist parliamentary life. Both the first and the third book in this series are initially published as special issues of the *Journal of Legislative Studies*.

RCLS is also the proud co-sponsor of a conference that was held in Prague in 2003, organised by the Institute of Sociology of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, devoted to the topic of 'Central European Parliaments: The First Decade of Democratic Experience and Future Prospects'. As in all previous RCLS conferences and publications, participants were invited from Europe, both East and West, and from the United States and Canada.