

Foreword

Parliamentarism, the parliamentary system of government as well as the institution, that gives the whole thing its name, parliament, have shaped and are shaping the history of Europe, for “speaking” and “conversing” form the basis of political order.¹ Parliament, its representatives and their way of working moved increasingly into the focus of attention with the striving for national states in the nineteenth century. Parliamentarism had a special status in the interwar period – Europe’s parliamentarisation after 1918 became almost a catch-phrase. The period after the First World War was regarded as the climax, but at the same time also as the beginning of the profoundest crisis of democracy and parliamentarism.

The issues of the political structures in Eastern and South-Eastern European states have been dealt with from the most varied aspects in numerous papers and specialised studies, but without one single major work to analyse the different approaches to democracy in the interwar period on a comparative basis from the point of view of parliamentary institutions. Initially, the volume was intended to focus on countries with a common historical destiny or at least something close to it: Austria, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, Yugoslavia, Greece and the Baltic Countries, dealing with the following issues: parliamentarism in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe: evolution, characteristics, perceptions; the relationship between parliamentarism and political-institutional modernisation of the countries in this geopolitical area; the electoral systems and parliamentary representation in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe; the actors: their origins, education, political socialisation, parliamentary life; parliamentarians and the public environment; the social-professional structure of parliament; parliamentary practices: ceremonies, communication, parliamentary speeches; the reception of members of parliaments as a political elite in society; the vulnerabilities of the parliamentary system in Eastern and South-Eastern European society; the functioning of democracy in Eastern and South-Eastern European traditional societies.

Finally, these problems have been tackled – from both objective and subjective reasons – in the following states: Austria, Romania, Yugoslavia, Greece, Estonia and Latvia.

The volume contains 10 academic studies written by well-known specialists in this field of research. So, **Lothar Höbelt** in his study *Parliamentarism in Austria in the Interwar Period* emphasises the problems of the democratic, parliamentary construction in Austria, with the specific difficulties of changing from the status of being an Empire to the one of a democratic Republic. What is surprising is the difficulty of assuming the mechanisms that are specific to the parliamentary system by the political elite.

The difficulty of the democratic construction in the Baltic Countries is approached in two studies. The first one is by **Andres Kasekamp** and **Rein Toomla**, *Parliamentarism in Estonia* and offers a wide perspective of the construction of democracy and parliament in the independent Republic of Estonia, in the years 1918-1940, with an overview of the political development and constitutional framework of the period and continues with an analysis of representative assemblies and their composition, political parties, election results, the socio-demographic composition of members of parliament, and finally the

¹ In this present work, parliamentarism, parliamentary system and representative system are used as synonyms, all presupposing the existence of a parliament as one of several institutions of a system of government.

parliaments' relations with other state institutions. The second study by **Aivars Stranga**, *The Political System of Karlis Ulmanis' Authoritarian Regime (15.05.1934. – 17.06.1940)* deals with the dispute between democracy and authoritarianism in Latvia, presenting mainly the political system during the authoritarian regime between 1934-1940.

Some aspects of the democratic system in Greece are covered in two studies: **Spyridon G. Ploumidis**, *Agrarian Politics in Interwar Greece: The Stillborn 'Peasant' Parties (1923-1936)* and **Eleftheria Manta**, *The 'National Socialist Party of Greece' and its Contacts with Italy: Contribution to the Study of Greek Fascism*. Spyridon G. Ploumidis examines the role played by agrarian ideology in interwar Greek politics. The emergence of the peasant as an active factor in political and social life was a striking phenomenon in the history of Greek politics between the two world wars. In addition, it investigates the origins and identity of the agrarian political players, and their parliamentary career. Similarities and differences between the right-wing and the left-wing agrarian agenda are highlighted. Last but not least, the influence of agrarian populism on the discourse of Greek nationalism is also briefly considered. Eleftheria Manta analyses the development of the fascist phenomenon during the economic crisis from the beginning of the thirties, the context in which George Merkouris founded the National Socialist Party of Greece. The purpose was to disseminate the 'new ideas' to the mass of the people, these 'new ideas' representing the need to change the parliamentary system that had led the nation into an impasse. The study focuses on the relations between this fascist organization and Mussolini's Italy.

The parliamentary development in Yugoslavia is dealt with **Sime Piroćić**, *Yugoslavian Reality Reflected in a Parliament Speech of Nikola Pašić* analyses the parliamentary speech given on 7 June 1923 by Nikola Pašić, the most important politician in the first years of the SCS state: a characterisation of political life is given and the main issues creating tensions between the Yugoslav nations from the beginning and questions the viability of the new state. On one hand, the analysis attests the artistry, in this case the rhetoric artistry, through which the Serbian Prime Minister managed to impose his will and avoid violence. But, most of all, it reflects the fundamental contradictions which, in time, led to the disintegration of Yugoslavia.

Hans-Christian Maner in his study, *Romania's Parliament in the Interwar Period. Bases, Social Composition and Aspects of Political Culture*, focuses on the main pillars of a parliamentary system of government. The article concentrates on some theoretical and practical aspects of parliamentary procedure in Romania during the interwar period, analyses fundamental texts, the Constitution, as well as the electoral law, and also the social and political structure of parliament with the main emphasis on the legislative periods of the years 1934-1937.

One subject that is well represented in the volume is connected with the status of the Hungarian minority in Romania, the political culture, parliamentary representation, and also the social composition of the political elite: **Egry Gábor**, *Crowding Out: Experiences of Difference, Discourses of Identity and Political Mobilization in Interwar Transylvania*; **Toth Szilárd**, *Hungarian Elites in the Romanian Parliament during the Interwar Period*. Another study about the Transylvanian parliamentary elite is by **Alexandru Nicolaescu** and **Sorin Radu**, *The Parliamentary Elite of the Romanian National Party (1919-1926)*. The study focuses its research on the social structure of the parliamentary elite of the National Romanian Party elected in the first parliamentary elections in united Romania:

1919, 1920, 1922 and 1926. The National Romanian Party was the most influential political force representing the provinces united with Romania in 1918 in Bucharest Parliament.

The volume brings together informative and important contributions on the fate of democracy and parliamentarism in Eastern Europe between both world wars. Examination of the nineteen-twenties and thirties is at the same time instructive and elucidative for the developments after the end of the communist system: on the one hand for the individual countries themselves, on the other hand also for the European perspective. For Europe, namely, its members' historical foundations are of central importance not only for understanding the present, but also for shaping the future with one another and for one another, not against one another.

Sorin Radu & Hans-Christian Maner