

How do core concepts travel?

Teaching and researching party politics in

Eastern Europe

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Paper prepared for the EPSNET Plenary Conference, Paris, France, 13-14 June, 2003

Introduction

By now the actual body of knowledge taught to university students in the Central Eastern European countries differs little from the one taught at Western universities. The adaptation of the Anglo-Saxon literature is by far the most advanced, but this language- and geographic-bias is not a post-Communist specificity. In other parts of the post-Communist world (Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia, etc.) the availability of Western literature is much more limited. In these regions it is particularly important which books happen to be translated to local languages. Conducting interviews with applicants in the countries from these regions, one can witness that the students almost uniformly draw their inspiration from the latest translations. This state of affairs highlights the crucial importance of the publishers' policies in these areas.

The flow of information between Western and Central-Eastern European countries is better, but the road towards a more complete integration of the discipline is not necessarily unproblematic. While the universe of the countries that can be studied has expanded, the major models, concepts and narratives of political science have, naturally, remained largely the same. The encounter of Eastern European reality with the largely Western European-based frames of mind can lead to exciting new discoveries, but can result in fundamental misunderstandings as well.

Giovanni Sartori (1970) has warned 33 years ago that the ambition to include new geographic and cultural areas in our studies may lead to "conceptual stretching". In the course of the eastward expansion of the study of parties Western political science absorbed both new regions and new academic communities. The danger Sartori was writing about became imminent, particularly since the study of ex-communist party systems has led to relatively few conceptual innovations. But conceptual stretching is not the only possibility. The application of old conceptual models to new phenomena can in fact lead to various outcomes. The following examples will illustrate these different trajectories.

Thin and thick concepts

A number of concepts used in the study of parties have both "thick" and "thin" definitions. When they are understood "thinly", without any particularistic content, their regional application causes no particular problem. In most studies polarization, for example, is used in this relatively shallow way: eg. as the ideological distance between the most extreme parties. When the concept is defined in this way it makes perfect sense to ask, for example, what factors shape the polarization of the party systems in post-Communist Europe.

But this question already involves a second type of concept, the one of “party system”. In order to meaningfully speak about a “party system” certain preconditions must be satisfied. A certain degree of stability, for example, is generally regarded as a prerequisite for any system-like configuration. In many of the post-communist countries research questions related to the features of party system were asked before one could speak of a stabilized pattern of interactions.

Teachers are particularly prone to be confronted with this problem, since students are eager to employ the concept in the analysis of the political environment they live in. In my opinion in this case the education of political science should follow somewhat different rules than scientific research. One of the most important skills students should learn is to discover the patterned relationships of the political world. Therefore, they should be encouraged and not discouraged to treat the cluster of parties they are surrounded with as a “system”, even though they should be warned that the lack of found relationships may be due to the fact that they apply the concept to phenomena that are not fully qualified to be included into such analyses. Students should be particularly warned not to employ hastily concepts that have obvious time requirements like partisan dealignment and realignment or political cleavages

Models to be complemented

A yet another challenge is posed by models which have been developed for Western countries, but which are potentially expendable with original research and conceptual engineering. The prime example of these models is Lipset and Rokkan’s cleavage model (Flora et al, 1999: 88). While the logic of socio-political camp-formation is similar across the whole continent, different social actors appear behind the parties in different regions of Europe.

The completion of Rokkan’s map of Europe requires empirical research based on inductive logic. The definition of cleavages is more a question of deductive discipline. Since many of the deep-running conflicts in the Eastern European countries are related to attitudes towards regimes and to nationalism, scholars and students are equally pressed by the dilemma whether to extend the concept of cleavage to these types of conflicts or to establish a separate label for them.

While the fact that the Lipset-Rokkan model is only partly applicable to Eastern Europe is obvious, in other cases we face deceptively generalizable theories. The theory of cartelization (Katz and Mair 1995) exemplifies this later category. There are many authors who find the theory applicable to Eastern European countries, but they usually use the term as a synonym for elitist politics. There is less emphasis placed on such elements of the original concept as the cooptation of the opposition in decision-making structures, the low stakes of the party competition and the share of spoils between losers and winners.

The reason why the cartel party model is seen to fit Eastern European reality so well, lies in the apparent absence of mass membership, and in the large scale alienation of the population from parties. (The latter sentiment applies to many political scientists as well, further increasing the popularity of the concept.) But in fact there are relatively few examples of overarching elite cooperations in the region. The so-called ‘Opposition Treaty’ signed in the Czech Republic between the Social Democrats and the Civic Democrats was one of the rare occasions when the label could be appropriately applied.

Comparing East and West

The discussion of the specificities of Eastern European party politics often happens through the juxtaposition of Eastern and Western “types”, often disregarding the fact that the homogeneous images of these regions cannot be anything but either ideal types or crude empirical generalizations. Eastern European students are particularly prone to forget about the differences between various Western European countries. But the overemphasis on the contrast between East and West hides many other, often more relevant dimensions of differences in academic publications as well.

A related fallacy is to think that moving towards East the dissimilarity to West increases linearly. In fact, for example, the religious-secular cleavage known from the Catholic countries is much more relevant for party politics in Turkey than for the Orthodox or even for the Lutheran countries.

Often the East of today is contrasted not with today’s West, but with the West of the time of the original party formation. Such a contrast can be particularly enlightening, but it can also mislead the proper assessment of the actual power of parties in the region. The standard description of the development of Western party politics claims that parties played a crucial role not only in the functioning of democracy, but more broadly in the development of mass societies and the consolidation of modern states (Apter 1965: 186ff). In such cases, party competition was one of the mechanisms that facilitated the transformation of isolated communities and deeply divided casts, classes or orders into a nationally conscious citizenry. This historical role was possible, claims the standard interpretation, because many political parties did not confine their activity to purely political matters but engaged in providing social services (social security, education, entertainment, etc.) for their constituency. Interest in non-parochial issues, mass participation, democracy, full-fledged political identities and party politics arrived inherently tied to each other.

In contrast, during the (re-)democratization of Eastern Europe citizens were already incorporated, mobilized, activated and politicized (Mair 1997: 180), and a unified national political market was simply given at the arrival of electoral competition. Political parties have usually played a marginal role in citizens' everyday life ever since, and even their contribution to the consolidation of democratic rule is questionable (Tóka 1997).

These accurate observations may lead us to conclude that the parties are present only in the echelons of power and they lack social influence. But that is a misunderstanding of the Eastern European reality. True, citizens rarely get into direct contact with party organizations (though there are some notable exceptions) due to the fact that mass media, and not organization or face-to-face socialization provides the main vehicle for the parties’ social influence. But this mediated link between parties and citizens does not exclude the possibility that the voters’ political attitudes, their satisfaction with the state of economy, and even their attitudes concerning their personal life-chance can be profoundly shaped by parties.

Parties have actually a strong impact on attitude formation in the region, partly due to the lack of rival organizations, the weakness of social movements and interest groups. Most protest activities are sponsored by parties and other traditional organizations and not social movements (Ekiert and Kubik 1998: 559). Trade union membership is low and the influence of trade unions on government policies is very weak throughout the region. Newspapers have strong party political leanings, and many civic associations are sponsored by parties or are used for would-be politicians as springboards for their a party political carrier. The relative social impact of Eastern political parties can therefore supersede the Western ones.

The students of Eastern European party politics also confront the classical question of comparative research: the question of equivalence. One example which raises this issue concerns the utility of the party family concept. There are, first of all, large number of parties in Eastern Europe that lack traditional ideological identity and official relations to European party families. Many of them have a considerable political influence. The existence of parties like the Smer and Meciar's party, the HZDS, in Slovakia or the Smallholders, in Hungary, raises the question whether it is meaningful to establish a specific "populist" party family category - a question that has its relevance in the West as well. More regions specific phenomenon is represented by the "parties of power" in Russia: the Unity and the Fatherland-All Russia (OVR), for example.

Another related dilemma stems from the fact that many Eastern European parties did join European party families and adopted various standard labels. Since these parties had strong strategic reasons to do that, the relationship between the actual ideology of these parties and the labels can be more loose than in the case of many Western European examples. Particular classificatory problems emerge with the ex-Communist Social Democrats, with the Orthodox Christian Democrats and with the economically left wing Conservatives.

Most of the above listed problems are far from being unresolvable. But the answers must be based more on the universal criteria of research and teaching, and less on the parochial perspectives of Western and Eastern political science.

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