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PARTY POLITICS IN POST-COMMUNIST
TRANSITION*Zsolt Enyedi*

Party politics in post-communist countries typically is analyzed from the vantage points of democratization and consolidation despite the fact that the most recent developments in these party systems are often unrelated to the transition process or to communism *per se*. The collapse of the one-party totalitarian regime has presented party politics with a unique challenge. As a result, party behavior is substantially different from both the established liberal democracies and other third-wave democracies. The fact that the inclusion of citizens into the political body preceded the phase of contestation sets the region apart from Western Europe, where a competitive oligarchic system democratized, and Southern Europe, where both mobilization and contestation were at a low level under authoritarianism (van Biezen, 2003: 26). When democratization reached Eastern Europe, its citizens were already mobilized and politicized (Mair, 1997: 180). Endowed with the skills of 'cognitive mobilization', they can rely on their own education-based knowledge and on the information provided by the mass media.

Scholarship has moved away from emphasizing the underlying commonalities (Kitschelt, 1992), to accentuating the subregional specificities within the post-communist world (Ágh, 1998b; Evans and Whitefield, 1993; Kitschelt, 1995). However, heterogeneity makes post-communist party politics even more popular as the target of research. The similar immediate past and the diverging outcomes hold out to researchers the unique promise of tracing the effect of various institutional and cultural factors. There is one major obstacle that hinders

the establishment of quasi-experimental research designs: it is difficult to disentangle the consequences of the political transition from the regional peculiarities. The Central Asian cases are yet to be incorporated into party research, the status of African socialist systems is contested, while Cuba, China or Vietnam are not (yet) in the post-communist box. That is, post-communist studies are predominantly Eastern European studies; the conceptual and the area studies approaches are intimately interwoven.

**THE RELEVANCE OF PARTIES IN
DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION**

The post-communist transformation is regarded as unique in its comprehensive character. A new economic system, a new political system, new constitutional regimes and, sometimes, new states were to be built simultaneously (Offe, 1991; Bunce, 1995). Parties had to face the legacy of weak or non-existent democratic experience and complete concentration of power under communism. Observers claim that both the difficulty and the necessity of building strong parties follow from the extent of these changes. Kitschelt (1996: 2), for example, states: 'In post-communist regimes, the early formation of powerful parties may be an even more important ingredient of democratic consolidation than elsewhere'. This expectation is built on the venerable tradition in political science that assigns crucial functions to parties in the stabilization of democratic regimes

(Huntington, 1968; Diamond, 1997; Mainwaring and Scully, 1994).

The actual role that parties fulfill in the region is hotly debated, however. Some authors include parties among the chief agents of the transition and consolidation (e.g., Ágh, 1998a; Elster *et al.*, 1998) while others consider them marginal and inconsequential (Tóka, 1997). Typically, the international environment and the deteriorating economic situation are regarded as the principal background factors of the transition, and communist *nomenklaturas*, the counter-elites and various civic initiatives ('fora', 'movements', or 'national fronts') are regarded as the principal local actors. Markowski (2001) argues that the development of diffuse political support may precede and not follow the institutionalization of the party system. The general ambiguity surrounding the role of parties is well illustrated by the comments of Lewis. On the one hand, he claims that parties were marginal in democratic transition, particularly in its early stages (Lewis, 2000: 20). On the other hand, he asserts: 'Competitive parties have been one of the primary organized agencies of political change and the main vehicle for the institutional development of post-communist democracy' (Lewis, 2000: xi).

The reach of the party system varies significantly across the region. Party competition is still under severe constraints in the regimes of Central Asia. Authoritarian regimes also developed in Belarus and Azerbaijan, and the pluralist political system has not yet been institutionalized in Georgia and Armenia. The struggle for power between elite factions unfolds on non-electoral fields, while elections only register the victory retrospectively (Segert, 1996: 232). Economies that depend on specific natural resources and that are organized according to informal rules provide a particularly hostile environment for regular alternation in power. The wars and civil wars that followed the collapse of communism in Yugoslavia, Moldova, and Georgia also hindered the stabilization and differentiation of parties. The two major Eastern European countries, Russia and Ukraine, possess a higher degree of pluralism, but both the relevance and the equality of their political parties are questionable. In Russia parties have little influence on the composition of the government. The military and security apparatuses, economic interest groups, regional governors, and the executive are the major players. Referring to government-sponsored parties, Sakwa (2001: 84) claims, 'Rather than parties forming the government, in Russia it was the executive

branch that tended to take the initiative in party formations'.

As Freedom House scores attest, most other former communist countries can be considered formally democratic. But in many of them there were periods when the state developed particularly close ties with a party or a group of parties. Analysts often claimed to detect the reemergence of pre-war hegemonic parties and predominant party systems (Ágh, 1996: 255). Finally, however, only Central Asia, the Caucasus and Belarus produced the respective pattern. In other areas, frequent turnovers in government are more typical. Instead of authoritarianism, rather extreme competition endangers the stabilization of democracy (Mair, 1991). Elections end with government alternation more often than was the case after the democratic transition in the West partly because in Eastern Europe the representatives of the *ancien régime* could return to power (Beyme, 2003).

Structured competition, strong and stable links between parties and citizens, and stable party organization – in other words, party system institutionalization – has encountered considerable obstacles all over the post-communist world. Scholars most often point to the following hostile factors: weakness and instability of sociopolitical differentiation (meaning, in its moderate version, the lack of cleavages or, in its more radical formulation, the complete atomization of the society), alienation from the political system, elite-driven political transition, the particularly large influence of electronic media, anti-party sentiments, weak civil society, international constraints on government activities, and the shortness of democratic experience (Evans and Whitefield, 1993; Katz, 1996; Mair, 1997; Hanley, 2001).

High electoral volatility, low popularity of parties, relatively low turnout, small party membership, weak partisan identities, weak grounding of parties in civil society, their financial dependence on state, and low level of organizational loyalty among politicians are the most glaring signs of weak institutionalization. The lack of members and loyal supporters makes it difficult for parties to articulate and aggregate preferences. High volatility and shifting loyalties in the party elite weaken the accountability and responsiveness of officeholders (Tóka, 1997: 170).

Based on these observations, a major group of scholars emphasized the fluidity and immaturity of post-communist party politics. Another group of researchers, however, are ready to point out the emergence of relatively stable structures and the predominant role of

parties, particularly in East-Central Europe. The difference between these two approaches is discussed below at systemic, sociological, organizational, and institutional levels.

The institutionalization perspective directs attention to the difference between the power of parties and personalities (Mainwaring, 1998). A contrast between individual political entrepreneurs and political parties indicates the dominance of the latter in Central Europe, and the prominence of the former in the former Soviet Union, with the exception of the Baltic countries. However, as the defeat of many famous individuals proves, personal popularity is nowhere a powerful enough electoral asset. Party leaders often have unquestioned authority within their parties, and their charismatic appeal may explain a considerable portion of the vote. But charismatic leadership does not always hurt party government. When leaders such as Klaus and Orbán emerge from within a party, maintain party loyalty, and invest considerable energy in working out an ideological framework, their role may even strengthen the crystallization of the party system. These leaders proved to be more effective politicians than their more famous colleagues (e.g., Wałęsa and Havel) exactly due to their firm party backing. Outsiders, such as the 1990 Polish presidential candidate Tyminski, achieve impressive results from time to time, but without a party behind them they cannot consolidate their achievements. The new political class was by and large created by the parties in these countries (Agh, 1996: 260).

Independents have unprecedented influence, however, in the eastern part of the post-communist world. In 2000 in Belarus 74% of legislators did not belong to parties. In Ukraine in 1994 two-thirds, and in 2002 21%, of the MPs were independent (Lewis, 2003: 154–5). The weakness of parties is most obvious at the level of local politics. Typically less than half of local councilors are party members.

Observers agree that political parties are rather weak in performing the functions of integration, mobilization, and mediation (Lewis, 2001: 486). However, in East-Central Europe their weakness in the representative functions is counterbalanced by their strength in procedural functions: organization of parliament and government, recruitment, etc. Through the privatization process they are able to create new owners and even new social strata. The dominant weight of parties in governing the society and in selecting the political elite may justify the concept of 'overparticipation'. In Agh's (1996: 251) view, parties may

even endanger democracy by leaving no space for other organizations. Few institutions can challenge the influence of parties in these countries. The *esprit de corps* of the bureaucracy, the military, the judicial system, etc., was broken during the transition. The main exception to this rule is the mass media.

Goal definition and policy formulation are in the hands of presidents and lobby groups in the Eastern part of the region, while in Central Europe the political agenda is determined by parties and the principal decisions are made by party officials or by those who are under their control. Scholars are critical of the ability of parties to articulate preferences, but one must remember that alternative organizations such as trade unions, social movements, and civic initiatives also lack mobilizational potential and popularity.

Well-entrenched party systems are no guarantee for democratic consolidation if they compete according to clientelistic and not programmatic principles. Kitschelt (1995, 1996: 21, 2001) claims that this is particularly true when the electorates are relatively sophisticated, which is the case in most post-communist countries. Empirical analyses indicate that the ideological structuration of Eastern European party systems is comparable to the Western ones and is above the Latin American average (Kitschelt, 2003), but the intra-regional variation is considerable.

In Kitschelt's model, the chances of programmatic competition are related to the level of sociocultural development of the society, the sophistication of the electorate, the nature of the communist and pre-communist regimes, the type of transition, and the newly built institutional frameworks. All these factors are interconnected and bundled into various trajectories. In societies that were agrarian before the communist regimes, that lacked working-class movements and democratic experience, communism developed a nepotistic face. The regime faced no serious opposition, and, therefore, the elite could initiate preemptive reforms and stabilize its power through clientelistic linkages. The continued dominance of the old elite does evoke opposition in the society, but the emotionally loaded tensions between the communist and anti-communist social networks merely reinforce personalism and clientelism. On the other extreme, a high level of socioeconomic development (industrialization, urbanization, modern bureaucracy) and full-fledged party politics prior to communism, coupled with a replacement type of transition, present ideal conditions for programmatic competition.

As indicated by this logic, the success of the democratization process is often linked to the failure of the *ancien régime* forces to maintain a strong bargaining position. One way for the communist elite to preserve its grip on power is exactly to promote rules (majoritarian electoral system, presidentialism, etc.) that weaken the partisan logic and strengthen the role of personalities. Clientelism, patronage, and rent-seeking are also claimed to be closely related to the former communist parties' ability to maintain continuity (Kitschelt, 1996).

The negative impact of *ancien régime* elites on the consolidation of party systems is far from obvious, however. On average, the politicians of the successor parties were more loyal, professional and efficient than their opponents, who, in the first years at least, were amateurs, lacking organizational skills, party loyalty, and commitment to politics (Kopecký, 2003: 142–3). Most scholars work with a definition of a 'political party' that excludes the leading organizations of one-party states, since they are more like state organs than like voluntary organizations. The success of the communist organizations in the democratic era indicates, however, that there was more 'partyiness' in these institutions than typically perceived.

DIMENSIONS OF PARTY SYSTEMS

Those scholars who describe post-communist party systems as open and inchoate attribute the high level of fluidity to such structural factors as the lack of stable party affiliations and the large stakes of competition (Mair, 1997). Given the high electoral volatility and the weakness of partisan traditions, politicians have no particular reason to be loyal to losing parties. Even joining non-parliamentary parties may be rational: parties that did not exist during the previous election captured a significant share, sometimes even the majority, of the votes in Russia (1999), Poland (2001), Slovakia (1998, 2001), Bulgaria (2001) and Latvia (1998, 2002). As a result, the loyalty of politicians does not always exceed that of voters. In Russia almost one-third of the seats changed hands between the election and the first Duma session in 1999. In Estonia, among those candidates who ran at successive elections, only 41% stuck to their party (Kreuzer and Pettai, 2003: 85).

Party system stability is not uniformly low in the region. In the Czech Republic and Hungary only one new parliamentary party emerged during the last decade, and they were

both splinter groups of existing parties. In the Czech parliament, only two deputies quit their party between 1998 and 2002 (Williams, 2003: 53). Where a stable pattern of conflict develops, it seems to have a stabilizing effect on the attitudes and behavior of the voters. The relatively low electoral volatility of the Czech party system and the decrease in the Hungarian volatility, for example, are attributable to the consolidated structure of party competition (Toole, 2000).

The predictability of party systems increases if certain parties are unwilling to cooperate with each other. In this regard considerable structure characterizes post-communist party systems.¹ There are strong attempts on behalf of parties to isolate each other. The antagonism between 'arch-enemies' (e.g., Solidarity and the Social Democrats in Poland, the Social Democrats and the Civic Party in the Czech Republic, Meciar's Movement and the Christian Democrats in Slovakia, the Democrats and the Socialists in Albania or the Socialists and Fidesz in Hungary) helped the development of a bipolar structure.

The fact that range of potential governing parties is restricted also contributes to the closure of the party systems. Orthodox communists are not seen as acceptable coalition partners in East-Central Europe, and the extreme right is also typically excluded (short-lived exceptions come from Slovakia and Yugoslavia). The West appears as a major constraining force in this regard. The victorious parties in Yugoslavia, Hungary and Romania, for example, received serious warnings not to rely on the support of respectively the Radicals, the MIÉP and the Greater Romania Party. In the Czech Republic, two parties have been permanently excluded from coalition alternatives. By stigmatizing the Republican party (SPR-RSC) and the Communist party (KSCM), the major parties have pushed one-fifth of the parliament out of the game. In this regard not so much openness but rather over-determination seems to characterize coalition building.

Post-communist party systems are fragmented (Bielasiak, 2002), but the difference between Western and Eastern Europe is not statistically significant (Birch, 2001). Due to the various forms of cooperation between parties it is rather difficult to enumerate them. The Polish AWS, for example, was composed of more than 30 parties and other organizations (Szczepiński, 2001). The widespread cooperation of parties in the region makes particularly obvious how weak the political science is on cooperation and fusion, as opposed to competition.

Institutional tinkering, together with the growing experience of voters, led to a decrease in the number of parties in East-Central Europe (Bielasiak, 2002: 204). The introduction of PR electoral rules in some countries seems to point in the opposite direction, but high fragmentation typically preceded, rather than followed this institutional change (Jasiewicz, 2003: 182).

The experience of small Western European countries taught political science that fragmentation does not necessarily undermine stability. The recent history of post-communist countries has a parallel message concerning polarization. Kitschelt (1996) highlights that programmatic polarization has both beneficial and pernicious effects: it may destabilize the system through frequent changes in policies and through stalemate, but it may also help by structuring programmatic divisions and increasing the level of representation. The empirical evidence indicates that high polarization typically goes together with more thorough consolidation in the region.

Polarization is not yet able, however, to stabilize electoral behavior. The classical dilemma of electoral behavior research was how to explain the stability of voting despite the general lack of political information, knowledge and stable attitudes towards political issues. In Eastern Europe the situation is one of instability in party affiliations despite the strong attempts of parties to create mental barriers and to offer the sense of deep divisions in society.

PATTERNS OF CONFLICT

As far as the emerging shape of the party systems is concerned, Western parties and party federations provide one of the most important stimuli, socializing the Eastern parties into their programmatic and coalitional preferences (Pridham, 2001). Pre-communist traditions also influence the landscape of parties. Cultural debates that were dormant for a long time reemerged, and considerable continuity with pre-war geographic voting patterns can be observed in some of these countries (Wittenberg, 1998), although the reestablished historical parties proved to be surprisingly weak.

While Western party families do have their local representatives, there are still relatively many parties that have no links to European party alliances and cannot be easily fitted into Western (or any) categories. Unreformed communist parties, populist but not extreme right groups (e.g., the Movement for Democratic

Slovakia, People's Movement Rukh, Slovenian People's Party, the National Movement of Simeon II), the 'parties of power' (i.e., presidential parties), and electoral alliances formed around charismatic leaders (e.g., the Party for Civic Understanding (SOP) and Direction (SMER) in Slovakia) encountered difficulties finding allies in the West.

Center-right parties exist both in their Christian democratic and conservative variants, but some of them are probably better labelled as right authoritarian (Segert, 1996). They are often characterized by statist, anti-individualist and, therefore, anti-capitalist rhetoric. The left is typically dominated by the communist successor parties, some of them adopting a nationalistic rhetoric, others modernizing themselves into social democrats (Segert, 1996; Bozóki and Ishiyama, 2002). The extreme right, led by charismatic leaders, is present in most countries. These parties typically differ from their Western siblings in focusing not on immigration but on nationalism.

Party competition is most frequently projected into a two-dimensional space. According to Kitschelt's (1992) deductive reasoning, the rules specifying who is a legitimate player (inclusive or exclusive citizenship), and the nature of the rules the players are expected to follow (hierarchical or participatory mode of decision-making) form the first, libertarian-authoritarian or cosmopolitan-particularist dimension. Attitudes concerning the assets players are endowed with (market or non-market logic of distribution of resources) form the second axis. Where a free market is the status quo, libertarians are expected to have negative views on it and to search for alternatives. In state dominated economics anti-market views, however, must go together with an authoritarian orientation.²

In 'patrimonial regimes', which were characterized in the pre-communist era by a low level of bureaucratic institutionalization, intra-elite contestation, and interest articulation (e.g., Bulgaria and Romania), the political space is divided into communist and anti-communist authoritarians, the economic, political, and cultural divisions reinforce each other, and there is little room left for libertarians. In 'bureaucratic socialism' (the Czech part of Czechoslovakia, East Germany), early industrialization, secularization, and the strong working-class movement marginalized social division over morality and left distributive issues as the only source of division.

The dimension of authoritarianism-libertarianism is really consequential for party

competition only in 'national-accommodative' regimes (Hungary, Poland, perhaps Croatia, Slovakia, Slovenia). In these countries the early reforms lessened the sharp economic differences. Parties looking for ways of differentiating themselves turn therefore to moral-cultural appeals involving issues such as nationalism, traditionalism, clericalism, anti-Westernism. Early industrialization and secularization did not crowd these issues off the agenda, and the fast collapse of state socialist political structure made the exclusive focus on anti-communism less plausible (Kitschelt, 2001: 312).

While it is difficult to prove the causal elements of the theory (e.g., that the relevance of a cultural issue is a function of the lack of differentiation on economic issues), the central role of cultural tensions is indeed a remarkable feature of the respective countries. Ideological competition typically produces three poles: the populist and libertarian socialists (post-communists) are pitted against pro-market libertarians and traditionalist Christian nationalists who are inclined to limit the market.

Most scholars (Berglund *et al.*, 2004b; Kitschelt *et al.*, 1999; Kitschelt, 2001: 312) regard the regime divide (anti-communism) as transitory, particularly in the national-accommodative countries. The logic behind this expectation is compelling, and yet a number of cases (e.g., Poland, Hungary) seem to contradict it. In these countries anti-communism is one of the most important markers of right-wing identity and this issue has resurfaced in each electoral campaign since 1990.

Given the different trajectories, different patterns of competition can be found within close geographic proximity. In the Czech Republic, for example, one finds a unidimensional opposition between left and right, where the two poles are defined in economic terms. In Slovakia left-right terminology is much less useful in interpreting the alliance structure. Meciar's opposition includes Christian democrats, liberals, and social democrats, while among Meciar's supporters one finds nationalists and radical leftists alike. Authoritarianism seems to be a better label for the major divide (Krause, 2000). Until the 2004 European Parliament election Poland had been characterized by a well-entrenched logic of left-right alternation but a fluid right spectrum. In the party systems that belong to the Polish pattern, the real stake in party system formation is who dominates the right (Sitter, 2002: 447). A major source of instability in countries such as Romania, Poland, and Lithuania is that the repeated attempts at coordinating the right have failed. The decline in

Hungarian volatility, on the other hand, is largely due to the consolidation of Fidesz's reign over the right.

In those countries where a bipolar structure is discernable, the two poles are formed by socialist, social democratic and Christian conservative parties, similarly to the West. However, the bipolar pattern does not seem to be more resistant to change than other configurations. In Bulgaria, for example, a centrist movement could break through in spite of the earlier bipolar structure.

PARTY AND SOCIETY

The scope of support for the party systems is reflected in the level of turnout, strength of party identification, stability of voting patterns, level of party membership, and the attitudes of the citizens toward the party system. As indicated above, post-communists politics has a poor record on these dimensions, and this is where the supporters of the immaturity thesis take most of their examples.

The distrust of parties is particularly high (Rose, 1995; Wyman *et al.*, 1995), and it goes together with a generally high level of dissatisfaction with democracy. Disappointment, rather than distrust, is indicated by the extraordinarily high electoral volatility figures (Tóka, 1998; Bielasiak, 2002). In Russia, around half of the electorate identifies with none of the parties, and consequently aggregate volatility was 51.4% in 1995 and 54.4% in 1999 (White, 2004). In some districts the option 'against all' is chosen by more people than any of the parties (Rose *et al.*, 2001). In Latvia, electoral volatility reached 74.2% by the third election (Kreuzer and Pettai, 2003: 84).

Turnout is typically low and somewhat declining, although cross-national differences are more remarkable than common trends. In some countries, parties clearly lost their mobilizational power as the party system crystallized,³ while in others, they never had this power.⁴ In a third group of countries, electoral participation seems to be a function of the degree of polarization.⁵

Most scholars suspect that behind the generally low level of popularity of party politics stand the weak linkages between parties and social groups. Post-communist politics is not based on cleavages in the way Western European politics was during the 20th century. This state of affairs is attributed to the nature of parties that emerged from elite debates concerning the

institutional reforms and to the nature of societies that lack well-crystallized group structures. The novelty of market-based institutions may also hinder the development of economy-based group identifications. A large part of the literature regards the direct links between social structures and party systems as the key ingredient for the stabilization of the latter. The anchorage of parties in pre-existing social categories may speed up party system formation, and even compensate for a well-developed civil society (Evans and Whitefield, 1996).

Dissenters acknowledge that stable voting patterns are beneficial but claim that such patterns can occur in many ways, and not only through a strong correlation between social structure and vote. Tóka (1998) has recently demonstrated that pure value voting is stronger in cementing party loyalties in East-Central Europe than cleavage voting. There is little reason, in fact, to treat the social determination of party politics as a sign of democratic consolidation and party system maturity. In the era of media politics, secularization and individualization, tight group-party relations are unlikely to develop.

Despite the relative absence of well-crystallized social cleavages,⁶ sociodemographic factors do shape electoral behavior. In particular, gender, age, education, region, level of religiosity, income and ethnicity have a strong influence on party preferences (Miller *et al.*, 2000; Tóka, 1996, 1998). Ethnicity provides the most clear-cut cleavage line in the region, particularly when coupled with geographic concentration.

Although observers regularly predict the future ascendance of the class cleavage (Mateju *et al.*, 1999), up to now there have been few signs of class becoming a decisive factor. Successor parties typically attract lower-class voters but they cannot be regarded as class parties. The fear of the unknown on behalf of older voters with non-convertible skills explains the voter profile of these parties better than any kind of working-class movement.

PARTY ORGANIZATION

Post-communist parties are typically dominated by their leadership; the role of the members is secondary. Scattered information on the topic indicates that the trend towards centralization continues. The level of party membership is low, and membership fees contribute a small fragment of the parties' overall budget. Kopecký (1995) attributes the neglect of members to the

following reasons: the finances of the parties are based on other sources (mainly state transfers); the leaders see members as challengers; and the lack of preexisting party loyalties and the high level of depoliticization make it difficult to attract new members. Observers agree that post-communist transition did not produce mass parties. The labels applied vary, but the bottom line is that most parties in the region are known to have a shallow organizational structure (see also Mair, 1997; Katz, 1996: 122; Kopecký, 1995). Lewis (1996: 12) claims, 'The problem here is that the democratic post-communist parties not only lack anything like mass membership, they are also devoid of any developed organization or structure.' Some of the successor parties are recognized as exceptions: they do rely more heavily on fees and have typically a more intensive internal life.

Researchers are likely to detect higher level of organizational development if they focus less on members and more on organizational complexity. In terms of the degree of division of labor, the party's autonomy *vis-à-vis* its environment, the existence of branch offices around the country, elaborate party hierarchy and permanent and professional staff, the parties of the region score relatively well. They typically have a structure that is modeled after mass parties: they have registered members, national congresses, branches, local offices, constitutions, full-time staff, etc. (Katz, 1996: 122; van Biezen, 2003). Decision-making is centralized and bureaucratized, the parties' representatives are under the control of the parties' elected leadership, and the established parties can rely on a regular flow of contributions.

Given that the parties are often internally created and are particularly sensitive to electoral results, the party in public office was expected to dominate the extra-parliamentary arm of parties. But, as van Biezen (2003) showed recently, the party in central office in fact has the upper hand in East-Central Europe.⁷ Most parties constrain the freedom of their parliamentary faction, the members of parliament regard the extra-parliamentary leadership as more influential and the central office receives significantly more money than the parliamentary faction.

THE INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT OF PARTIES

Institutions deserve attention as indicators of the weight of parties within the political

system, showing their success in establishing an environment favorable to themselves. The analysis of institutions seems to strengthen the position of those who attribute a central role to parties in post-communist politics.

When it came to a choice between large versus small district magnitude, parliamentarism versus presidentialism, and unicameralism versus bicameralism, the majority of the post-communist states opted for the former alternatives. These institutions allow for programmatic cohesion and provide a party-friendly environment. The central role of parliaments in democratization has contributed to the dominance of parties over interest groups. The recent shift of power to the executive branch and the 'fast-track legislative procedure' due to the EU accession weakened the parliaments in East-Central Europe, but the leverage of the parties *vis-à-vis* individual legislators was increased by the growing practice of detailed coalition agreements (Kopecký, 2003: 138, 148).

The dynamic analysis of the institutional reforms provides further evidence for the success of the established parties. Throughout the region, rules have been introduced to erect barriers against newcomers, halting the proliferation of parties. The thresholds for registration and for the entry into the electoral arena were raised, sometimes drastically. These new rules are aimed at preventing organizations other than nationally organized parties from accessing the parliament. Another group of recently introduced rules punishes the splitting of parliamentary groups by making it more difficult for the members of parliament to change group membership and by increasing the threshold for the establishment of parliamentary groups.

The rules of party finance are interpreted by most political scientists as further signs of the power of the established parties. Most post-communist states finance – in one way or another – their parties. The share of state money in a party's budget can be very high, reaching 70–80%. Scholars have been eager to point out that state finance endangers the links of parties to civil society, produces rent-seeking, and disadvantages parties that are too small to receive it. Probably the most frequently made criticism is that public money removes a key incentive for building party-society linkages (van Biezen, 2003: 41). Much less is written on the classical benefits of this institution, such as fair competition and relative transparency.

State finance, together with a number of other factors such as the relatively high electoral

thresholds, the decisive role of parties in governing, their focus on the state instead of members, and the weakness of other social actors seem to make the 'cartel party' model applicable in the post-communist context (Agh, 1998b: 109; Katz, 1996: 122; Sikk, 2003; Klima, 1998: 85). Critics of this thesis typically point at the lack of a 'fixed menu' of parties (Lewis, 1996: 12–14; Szczerbiak, 2001). But the concept of cartel is probably misleading even in those countries where new parties rarely manage to enter the parliament, since post-communist party systems are polarized, the stakes are high and coalition-making is constrained.⁸

Even if one would concentrate on the most often analyzed indicator of cartel party, that is, state finance, it must be acknowledged that state support may increase the parties' autonomy. By being granted a fixed portion of the state budget, parties can more freely shape their policies than if they were dependent on wealthy businessmen, corporations, or lobby groups. As van Biezen and Kopecký (2001) noted, actual state dependence may be exactly a result of illicit private financing, since that requires the parties to pay their sponsors with governmental spoils. A related concern, that state finance privileges large parties and freezes the party system, is equally exaggerated. In Estonia, for example, the increased reliance on public money was followed by the astonishing success of a new party and by increased volatility. The threshold for finance is typically somewhat lower than the electoral threshold, and in this sense it helps minor parties to stay competitive, although the principle of linking state finance to electoral results benefits, of course, the established parties.

The picture of state-dependent parties (Szczerbiak, 2001; Lewis, 2001; Katz, 1996; van Biezen, 2003) is heavily based on the examples of the Czech Republic and Hungary. The picture requires considerable qualification if one looks at the whole universe of Eastern European or post-communist party systems. Ukraine, Belarus, Latvia, and Moldova do not provide state support; Russia and Romania give only small amounts (Ikstens *et al.*, 2001). In Russia only 1.5% of the election-related income of the parties came from the state in 1999, not counting, of course, the privileged access of certain parties to national mass media and to the so-called administrative resources such as transport, offices, and publications (White, 2004). In other countries (e.g., Lithuania and Estonia) direct state finance was introduced only recently.

CONCLUSIONS

Post-communist party politics served political science with a number of lessons. Instead of summarizing the overview given above, let me provide in conclusion a short and subjective list of some of these suggestions:

1. Political scientists should pay more attention to the forms of cooperation between parties.
2. The non-structural party politics recently observed in developed democracies is not a parochial phenomenon; it is the dominant form of 21st-century politics.
3. Concepts such as that of the cartel party should be applied in their entire complexity in comparative research and not narrowed down to some of their easily measurable indicators like state finance.
4. More work is necessary on both East and West that uses a 'double-blind' approach, because at the moment stereotypes about the regions bias the interpretation of the data. It is hardly acceptable, for example, to regard individualistic party choice as a mature form of electoral behavior when it is observed in the West, but as a sign of immaturity if it comes from the East.
5. The research agenda of the coming years should include the systematic documentation of organizational developments, and theory-building should be based more directly on cross-national data sets.

Perhaps the most general conclusion that one can draw from the post-communist experience hitherto is that democratic politics by and large equals party politics. Whether this is an optimistic or pessimistic conclusion is left to the reader.

NOTES

1. Estonia stands out as the most obvious exception.
2. Kitschelt predicted that the parties far from the main dominant competitive dimension would not be able to attract many voters. The success of social democratic parties (some of them reformed successor parties) contradicted this early prediction, as did the appearance of economically right-wing and relatively nationalist authoritarian parties.
3. In the Czech Republic (Jasiewicz, 2003: 197) turnout was 98% in 1990, but only 58% in 2002.

4. In Poland turnout at the parliamentary elections varied between 43% and 52% (Markowski and Tucker, 2003).
5. In Hungary the second round of 2002 elections produced the most direct confrontation and the largest turnout (73%) thus far.
6. Körösiényi (1990: 63) proposed that integration into the *ancien régime's* political class should be treated as a structural factor. Given that in a number of countries the vote of the communist *nomenklatura* is concentrated on one party, this innovation would show the level of social determinance to be significantly higher.
7. Note that the high degree of fusion between the two 'faces' creates serious problems for this type of analysis.
8. The fact that parties are so much focused on their electoral activity (van Biezen, 2003; Lewis, 2001; van Biezen and Kopecký, 2001) should probably also be interpreted as an indicator of their competitiveness and vulnerability, and not of their remoteness from civil society.

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