

Analyzing the Dynamics of Post-Communist Party Systems: Some “Final Thoughts” on the EEPS Special [Section]

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The literature on the development of party systems in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe has basically revolved around four topics, three of which are represented in this issue, and maybe there is a fifth topic emerging soon, evolving out of the fourth. The first topic is whether mechanisms of accountability are at all involving politicians' delivery of collective and large-scale club goods to large citizen constituencies, or what is commonly referred to as “*programmatic politics*” and “*responsible partisan government*.” The answer to this question has to be at least partially in the affirmative to make reading the articles assembled in this EEPS issue worth while. I assume here with the authors of this volume that this is correct, although the agenda of studying alternatives or complements to programmatic partisan appeals—such as clientelistic, targeted, narrow material inducements, a symbolic politics of charismatic leadership, or also purely descriptive identity politics—is very much alive. So I will set this general topic aside.

The second subject of party research concerns the *political alignments along which politicians and parties differentiate their programmatic appeals in the post-communist democracies*, i.e. the stakes and policy positions according to which parties distinguish themselves from each other. This subject has to be separated from *social alignments* in a polity, based on group divisions in a population based on socio-demographic traits, political attitudes and preferences, as well as associative networks. Stein Rokkan highlighted this distinction, but was unfortunately sometimes accused of sociological reductionism to social cleavages: A fair reading of [end of page 81] Rokkan's (1970; 1999) massive work shows that the precise question of how—and to what extent—socio-economic and cultural divides in a population do or do not translate into political alignments was always at the heart of his analysis. In fact, his most important insights about the mobilization of class, religion, or the geographic or cultural “periphery” identify conditions under which subjectively felt social divides and grievances do not lead to a unique and precise articulation at the level of partisan competition. In this EEPS issue, Jan Rovny's paper speaks directly to the challenge of how to explain the content of political alignments in post-communist democracies.

The third subject in post-communist partisan studies concerns the *strategic positioning of parties on the issues or issue dimensions on which there is competitive programmatic differentiation*. This plays into the general literature about party competition which started out with pure formal modeling in the 1950s, but has taken an increasingly behavioral and inductive turn in recent decades, analyzing how parties respond to the positioning of competitors without trying to determine whether their choices satisfy some sort of equilibrium conditions (see, for example, the works by Adams et al. 2006). It is the métier of the Robert Rohrschneider and Stephen Whitefield paper in the EEPS issue to explore how European issues insert themselves into post-communist party competition, but with the special twist to examine the interaction between the salience of European integration and the position parties take on this question.

The fourth subject of the post-communist literature has to do with the *institutionalization and longevity of parties as organizations and specific labels*. One should great care distinguishing this object of research from the previous ones: There may be dominant and persistent political alignments in post-communist party systems (topic 2) on which parties place themselves in reaction to each other and to which they attribute differential salience

(topic 3), but it is quite a different matter whether the parties—as labels, organizations and collective actors—that impersonate these different dimensions also persist over time or put in only a fleeting existence. Indeed, it may be one of the great challenges of post-communist politics to build lasting parties, and this problem may in fact now help to trigger what could possibly emerge as a fifth subject which is obviously not covered in this volume. This is the question to which Kevin Deegan-Krause and Timothy Haughton’s paper speaks directly.

This fifth subject concerns the *interface between party system and democratic regime stability*. Many scholars of post-communist democratic politics at least tacitly took it for granted that once rules of party competition had been established that according to the usual rating schemes (Freedom House, Polity IV, and in the future V-dem at www.v-dem.net) may be scored as better than mere electoralism and instead inching toward liberal democracy with full civil and political liberties, there will be no chance for such polities to backslide into semi-authoritarianism or full authoritarianism. The regime question for such polities, in this view, became de facto closed. Instead, the last decade has demonstrated that not only in polities that were initially merely “electoral democracies,” but then never traveled up the gradient of improving [end of page 82] civil and political rights, such as Russia and Belarus in the 1990s and other successor states of the Soviet Union since then, democratic regime status may be at risk. The same predicament, however, may also affect countries that firmly appeared to cruise on a trajectory of upgrading their democratic practices and credentials.

This happens under conditions of high party system volatility, when some or all of the existing parties are wiped out, and the remaining or newly victorious partisan formations, faced with an implosion of opposition and counterweight in the party system, are attempting to lock in their gains by tampering with the rules of the democratic game to perpetuate their supremacy once and for all. This happened first in Latin America with the appearance of “21 century socialism,” prompting the newly victorious parties to fix a slanted playing field that permanently disadvantaged and muzzled their opponents (Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, and then Nicaragua). It also has been practiced (Bangladesh) or attempted (Thailand?) in South Asia, and is now under way in Turkey. More recently, developments in Romania and now especially in Hungary point in the direction that one political partisan player tries to exploit the weakness, division, and volatility of others to cement its predominance by degrading democratic competition. This is clearly a topic for future research, but here I will revisit only the three topics addressed in this EEPS issue.

Lines of Programmatic Conflict in Post-Communist Polities

The tabula rasa approach postulating that party systems had to be painted on a blank slate was seen off in the scholarly community quickly, displaced by different versions of the a political legacies approach that has persisted until recently (see especially Darden and Gryzmala-Busse 2006 and Pop-Eleches 2007 and in some ways even Bertoa 2014). The legacy element that Rovny places in the foreground, religious traditions and doctrines, is most likely part of the causal web that constitutes the power of legacies. I would like to see, however, more spelling out of the mechanisms that link this extremely distant, distal force to the more proximate economic and political considerations involved in political partisan conflict and alignments. The difference between Catholicism and Orthodoxy, for sure, is very deep in the background and mediated by a plethora of more proximate factors, particularly in those countries that are formally Orthodox, but show preciously little evidence of religious excitement, even though there maybe somewhat of a religious revival recently. Likewise, among the formally Catholic countries, the religious tradition plays an obvious, direct and strong role primarily in Poland, but certainly much less so in the other countries with a Catholic tradition.

Sincere there is insufficient space here for my final thoughts on the EEPS issue to enter into a detailed argument specifying the legacies of the past and the mechanisms that may link them to the present, let me instead address a forward-looking perspective. History goes on, and the cumulative weight of political and economic choices made after the end of communism create new challenges and political strategy options that have no precedent in older legacies. Inevitably, the constraints of communist and pre-communist politics and institutions will fade from the

scene by [end of page 83] being supplemented and increasingly supplanted by new facts on the ground political actors and societal processes have created since 1989. What are these more recent developments that will affect the political stakes and related partisan alignments then that we might expect to shape post-communist party competition?

Rovny nominates ethnic politics, the relationship between “diasporas” of minorities in newly independent states who belong to the main ethnicity governing a former imperial hegemon (Russia, Serbia), but now have been subordinated to the majority control of new titular ethnicities that were suppressed by the former imperial powers. Following Laitin (1999), as well as later Shayo (2009) and Baldwin and Huber (2010), I would submit, however, that the partisan politicization of ethnicity may become particularly virulent, when economic income and wealth stratification is ethnically patterned, i.e., where one ethnic group is clearly advantaged by the status quo (e.g., the ethnic diaspora minority) and the new titular majority ethnicity strives to erode the former group’s advantages through ethnic mobilization. It is such *distributive configurations*—rather than merely the relationship between an incumbent new titular ethnic majority and the diaspora status of an ethnic minority—that fuel the flames of ethno-cultural partisan divides. Such relations explain also intersecting configurations of programmatic alignment dimensions. It is not difficult to understand why in the Baltic countries or in Croatia parties catering to the Russian or Serbian ethnic minorities also embrace more “leftist,” anti-market, pro-state positions on questions of economic governance, whereas elsewhere ethnic minorities not affiliated with a former hegemon may be more rightist. The titular majorities of newly founded post-Soviet countries have been eager and willing to embrace economic “rightist” positions in order to erode the economic entrenchment of Russian and Serbian minorities in the state-run economies put in place by former imperial powers on their territory (Kitschelt 1995: 463-5).

Beyond the unfolding of ethnic partisan politics, entirely new developments that will have to be factored into post-communist partisan alignments concern the ongoing economic transformation within the region. Even in countries that liberalized their economies fast and built liberal market institutions in the 1990s, there are sectors of the statist-socialist economy that continued to be handled with a light touch. Aside from pension systems in much of Central Europe, these sacrosanct domains concern the public social services, from health care via education to an array of cultural and social services at the municipal level. These services tend to be over-staffed, weakly productive, and in need of substantial qualitative upgrading and efficiency, all of which require shedding employees and upskilling large parts of the remaining workforce through accelerated training and professionalization. This transformation is likely to hit especially middle- to upper-level white-collar employees and professionals whose salaries have already stagnated for many years and who have seen preciously few economic benefits of the post-communist order. Reforms in the social services would inflict new grievances on large numbers of people who have been yearning for a rapid catch-up to the standard of living enjoyed by their Western neighbors, but now are made to realize that the pathway to reach this objective is even more arduous, protracted, and fraught with sacrifices than earlier anticipated. [end of page 84]

Add on to this the economic stress, drift, and stagnation evidenced by many post-communist economies due to the financial crisis of 2007 and the Euro-crisis since 2010, resulting in the Great Recession and its aftermath of rather slow recovery and growth, this poisonous stew of social and economic conditions may go a long way towards explaining the upswing of right-wing populist, nationalist parties intolerant to cultural diversity and liberal individualism. In countries exiting from patrimonial communism, where often social security nets broke down in the disorderly transition to an oligarchical state capitalism, nationalist anti-libertarian and anti-market liberal, and ultimately anti-democratic partisan appeals always resonated strongly with large shares of the population that suffered great losses of income and security (Bustikova and Kitschelt 2009).¹ Putin’s right-wing populism is just the most recent incarnation of such propensities to rally a nationalist, authoritarian, and increasingly anti-market coalition of people who did not partake in the Russian resource boom, playing them off against a numerically small, but strategically placed, urban intelligentsia, professionals and young entrepreneurs

¹ Notwithstanding this factor, there are obviously a number of other conditions contributing to a thriving radical populist right, such as left-wing government policies that prompt a right-wing backlash. See Bustikova 2014.

and professionals some of whom have been the core of resistance to a dictatorial, autocratic, and personalistic regime shift.

But the economic malaise has now spread to large parts of post-communist East Central Europe as well, with the possible exception of some of the Baltic countries and Poland. Hungary and Slovenia in particular have gone through a long period of economic drift and relative decline compared to their Northeastern post-communist neighbors. They have been disappointed in their hopes that entry into the European Union would be the great accelerator of economic growth, repeating what East Europeans at least before the Euro crisis perceived as the spectacular rise of Mediterranean countries after EU entry in the early 1980s.

Economic stress and ethnic mobilization clearly interact in right-wing politics. Following Shayo (2009), and building on Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social group theory, aggrieved people seek gratification by identifying with collective identities whose rank is perceived as somewhat higher than one's own individual status in society, but still as sufficiently close, "available" and cognitively intelligible to serve as targets of collective reference and identification. People derive satisfaction from perceiving the group, as a whole, to advance when compared to other groups, whether this is in terms of economic success, military warfare, or in the realm of cultural status hierarchies (e.g. in global sports festivals, or in cultural contests). Moreover, gratification derives from depriving out-groups—and empirically here: especially ethnic minorities—of sources of political, social, and cultural status and economic success that may threaten the small advantages enjoyed by membership in the in-group.

Political alignments in post-communist polities thus tend to be multi-dimensional in that they involve (1) considerations of economic (re)distribution, (2) considerations of political governance (civil and political rights, exclusiveness and inclusiveness of political participation) and (3) the management of ethno-cultural identities and diversity. Drawing on Benoit and Laver (2006), Rovny argues correctly that in empirical research these dimensions cannot be simply established inductively, but need to be constructed based on theoretical premises. But this needs to show in the empirical research [end of page 85] strategy. I, for one, now believe that three dimensions of political preferences and party alignments must be created through confirmatory factor analyses (cf. Kitschelt and Rehm 2014). They reflect questions of economic distribution ("greed"), questions of socio-political governance ("grid"), and questions of collective identity and demarcation ("group"). Both legacies as well as new post-1989 developments affect the articulation of partisan alignments of post-communist countries on these three dimensions.

The Question of European Integration in Post-Communist Partisan Alignments

A new development that clearly needs to be inserted into this vein of analysis is the politicization of European Union (EU) integration, the subject of Rohrschneider and Whitefield's paper. The incorporation of the EU into party politics is an unprecedented issue that can only indirectly be related to historical legacies. Positions on this "issue" are more likely to result from the unfolding debates about the economic, social, and cultural benefits and costs of EU membership. The paper actually draws on two data points, one before (2007) and one after the Great Recession (2013), but the authors do not make much of the intertemporal comparison, and not without justification. Patterns of parties' EU alignment tend to be pretty similar at both time points in terms of salience and position. Nevertheless, let me emphasize that the Great Recession, and especially the Euro crisis embedded in it, may have served as a catalyst to sharpen the contours of partisan alignments on questions of European integration through the catalyst of the Great Recession, and Rohrschneider and Whitefield's statistics lend some faint support to this hypothesis.²

² As empirical evidence in Rohrschneider and Whitefield's paper, compare the size of the coefficients that associate a party's right wing position and the extremism of its position (right wing-squared) with its position on European integration: These coefficients rise in both Eastern and Western Europe from 2007 to 2013 (tables 2-5).

The most important point I take away from the paper, however, is one that is not even much emphasized by the authors and relates to general theories of party competition. The often intimated idea that a party's position on an issue (dimension) and the salience of the issue (dimension) for the party's political appeal are orthogonal to each other, and therefore need to be measured independently from each other, is evidently wrong. *Politicians take radical positions only on issue (dimensions) they would like to feature in their competitive battle with other parties. Radical positioning of a party on an issue equals salience of that issue for the party.* If politicians want to raise public attention to an issue dimension, they become notorious with an extreme position. The inverse, however, is not universally true: At least on some issue dimensions, parties may care a great deal, but nevertheless not take radical, but centrist positions. I would submit that this applies primarily to questions of economic distribution (taxation, social policy, budget/macro-economic fiscal/monetary policies) that allocate sufficiently large amounts of income to and from citizens that every party can ignore this distributive issue basket only at its own peril. While parties that establish their distinctiveness with extreme positions on other dimensions (political governance/civil rights/freedoms, or group identity/citizenship/migration) may want to obfuscate their positions on economic distribution, the dimension looms [end of page 86] sufficiently large everywhere to force them to show their cards and take positions, particularly if they are supporting a government.³ It is not by accident that the general popular salience of questions of EU integration increased with the recent Euro crisis, when large numbers of Europeans felt for the first time how integration may impinge on their economic well-being and how European economic integration creates internal divisions between Northern and Southern Europe, with France in an awkward middle position.

What I find somewhat dissatisfying about much of the literature on European integration and its impact on partisan alignments, political accountability and responsiveness, however, is that it is not clear to me whether EU integration can be conceived as an "issue," an "issue dimension," or a basket of issues that map in different ways on analytically more general policy dimensions, depending on the specific aspect to which attention is drawn: economic distribution, socio-political governance (civic rights, liberties, and political participation), or collective identities, as well as the relationship among parties' positions on these three aspects of European integration. Question framing in surveys typically present European integration as an integrated "bloc" on which voters pass wholesale judgment. But triangulation of different questions in mass surveys and also in expert questionnaires may turn up a more complex picture, when establishing why some voters (parties) are for or against European integration. EU integration critics on the Left care mostly about economic "globalization," and loss of national autonomy of democratic governance and civil liberties to an anonymous and unaccountable EU technocracy as reasons for their skepticism, while embracing the idea of a cosmopolitan and culturally inclusive notions of citizenship and diversity promoted by EU integration. Those, however, who oppose European integration on the right may calibrate their objections quite differently: For them, it is the collective identity dimension that reigns supreme and that makes Europe objectionable, as it is seen as displacing national identities by versus a supra-national bureaucracy) and the defense of national purity and homogeneity, protected from multiculturalism and immigration. And if economics comes into play, an anti-European Right may often endorse the same anti-liberal market positions as the Left, although sometimes it does position itself on the opposite side, namely blaming Europe for not offering enough market liberalism and instead succumbing to rent-seeking pressure politics.

What these complexities reveal is that the symmetry between left and right-wing anti-Europeanisms, suggested by Rohrschneider and Whitefield's graphs, does not fully pertain. Left and right opponents of Europe care about rather different questions, placing European integration in a multi-dimensional issue space. I personally doubt that something called a European integration dimension of programmatic competition has much validity. It is an artifact of data construction in mass and expert surveys. Different aspects of European integration map onto different dimensions of politics, but depending on exogenous shocks in economy, politics, and society, parties will selectively mobilize them. It would be neat to map these careers of European integration issues onto parties'

³ In other words, the lack of parties' agenda control over critical political issue dimensions blunts the idea that party competition tends to be about salience and "issue ownership" rather than policy position.

positions on policy dimensions, but the available [end of page 87] mass and expert survey data may be too coarse to allow for much headway in this direction right now.

Volatility of Party Labels and Party Organization: (partially) failing institutionalization?

The literature on political alignments and partisan cleavages deals with rather abstract semantic objects, such as partisan programmatic appeals and their dimensionality, whereas the literature on party system fragmentation and volatility, as well as party and systemic “institutionalization,” examines the creators behind those intellectual representations in flesh and blood: Parties as assemblages of people, offices, and supporters rallying around a label, the “stuff” constituting collective political action. Most of the time it is these collective actors, rather than lone politician-entrepreneurs, that create the semantic messages behind the programmatic partisan spaces of competition. Collective actors can disseminate messages all the more effectively and resonate better with electoral constituencies, if they build credibility. This requires a track record of words and deeds associated with the same partisan label. At a minimum, parties can achieve this only if they persist over multiple rounds of competition. Furthermore, by building extensive party organizations with multiple stakeholders they can boost their credibility. Extensive party organization helps them to disseminate their message. Multiple stakeholders in the organization serve as quasi-veto-players whose threat of defection limits the programmatic opportunism of small groups of leaders or activists and thus lend consistency and predictability to parties’ strategies.

It is at this concrete operational level of party identity and organization, where post-communist polities have achieved the least. As Deegan-Krause and Haughton’s paper shows, relatively few parties have managed to entrench themselves and their brand electorally for the long haul, whereas many parties have only a fleeting existence and are displaced quickly. The institutionalization and stabilization of partisan alternatives remains rather low. Post-communist countries may have identifiable dimensions of party competition, but few parties that credibly and persistently occupy regions in that programmatic space. A main virtue of the paper is to demonstrate this beyond the crude Pedersen index of net volatility in party systems by describing different profiles and trajectories of volatility within party systems. Particularly notable is the discovery of what the authors call “sub-systems” of parties, situated in a particular sector of the space of party competition, that are inhabited by unstable parties continuously replaced by a proliferation of successors, with no label hanging on for any extended number of electoral cycles, while parties outside these subsystems display more robustness.

The paper visualizes and computes profiles of party system instability in novel ways, but it also leaves two big questions for future research. First, we would need some simplified summary indices that could capture theoretically interesting structural patterns of variance among systemic and sub-systemic volatility. This presupposes, [end of page 88] second, that we have a deeper theoretical understanding of what attributes of volatility are worth explaining and particularly pertinent in the post-communist settings. Both of these questions remain basically unanswered in the article, even though there are leads on both to be found in various passages.

With regard to the second challenge, a theory of volatility, the paper mentions that parties should make organizational investments and develop a clear programmatic profile, while restraining the exalted position of party leaders, in order to boost a party’s expected durability. But I would consider these efforts to detail what is meant by stability or volatility, and not be an explanation thereof. We would want to know what enables some parties to engage in internal organizational investments and de-personalize party leadership in order to solve their collective action and collective choice problems (Aldrich 2011), while others fail to do so. It is also insufficient to attribute organizational institutionalization simply to superior leadership. That account always works in a narrative about individual cases, but does not explain patterns at the level of cohorts and crowds of parties some of which institutionalize while others do not.

The paper goes a step further by arguing that electoral laws, especially registration requirements and electoral thresholds, can facilitate or impede party turnover and thus volatility. More interestingly, and possibly specific to

post-communist Eastern Europe, is the hypothesis that new parties' rapid rise into government responsibilities thwarts their efforts to build internal organization and prematurely wears out their capacities to develop a clear profile and support base, thus contributing to, and possibly accelerating, the cycles of party turnover in the unstable sub-systems. This, of course, leads to the next question of why new parties have such an easy time to make it into government in post-communist democracies, and here, I submit, we finally have to step outside the confines of party competition theory and consider developments in society and political economy to account for partisan volatility in a similar vein as I surmised above, when discussing forces that affect programmatic alignments and parties' positioning on the various aspects of European integration.

First of all, inspecting figure 4 of Deegan-Krause/Haughton's paper leads me to advance the proposition that faltering economic performance, either sudden and sharp crises or gradual, cumulative erosion of regional competitiveness and stagnation, may trigger the breakdown of party subsystems. Consider the implosion of established party sub-systems during the Great Recession in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Slovenia, countries with hitherto rather stable party formations (panels 4A and 4B). At least in Hungary and Slovenia, furthermore, the partial collapse of the party system may have been foreshadowed by the countries' weak cumulative economic performance throughout the 2000s, when, e.g., compared to Poland and Slovakia. The latter two countries were considerably poorer at the beginning of the post-communist era than Hungary or Slovenia, yet they subsequently managed to catch up or surpass the post-1989 laggards. Not by chance, in Poland, Slovakia or Estonia resilient and robust growth, when compared to the rest of the region, particularly since the mid-2000s, coincides with a gradual stabilization of party systems (panels 4C and 4D).⁴ [end of page 89]

Second, add onto the general economic performance issues the specific crises of economic governance, triggered by exceptional corruption scandals and criminal economic malfeasance repeatedly occurring in post-communist countries. Such veritable valence issues can shock consolidating party systems and destroy existing sub-systems. Cases in point can be found throughout the region, among countries emerging from what I would call patrimonial communism in Bulgaria and Romania as well as those exiting from national-accommodative communism in Hungary, Slovenia, or Poland and the Baltics, and finally in Czechoslovakia, and especially the Czech Republic, after bureaucratic-authoritarian communism. Profound crises of corruption shake consolidating parties to their foundations and thereby trigger sub-systemic turnovers.

Conclusion

My first message in these "final thoughts" on the theme issue of EEPS is that the study of post-communist party systems involves an array of distinct objects of explanation and theoretical arguments. These should not be prematurely fused under a single umbrella, but discussed with some analytical separation. This separation is evidenced by the contributions to the current volume, where articles address the distinct problematics of accounting for the programmatic dimensionality of party systems, parties' specific position-taking on issues of European integration within that context, and the volatility of parties and party sub-systems in cross-national and inter-temporal comparison. The study of party systems does not address a single, seamless object of explanation as the ultimate dependent variable.

My second message is that explanatory accounts of post-communist party systems must consider processes and developments outside the sphere of party competition, and my favorite candidate here is political-economic features that interact with the process of party competition. Students of political interest mobilization and

⁴ Bernhard and Karakoc (2011: 12) based on a pooled time-series analysis appear to arrive at the different conclusion that volatility is lower in more affluent countries, but higher with more growth and lower inflation. Their results, however have to be taken with caution. They run a regression with 42 observations on 11 independent variables. Furthermore, it is unclear whether they have built in an appropriate lag between economic performance and party system volatility. Finally, they operationalize volatility in the "old-fashioned" way with a Pedersen-style summary calculation of net-change of all parties' electoral support from one election to the next.

representation, including research on parties and elections, for too long have been sitting at separate tables from students of political economy, focusing on how economic processes influence and are influenced by political power relations and reshape each other. In this regard, accounts of electoral and partisan politics need to take more notice of the trajectories of economic and institutional transformation under post-communism in order to make intelligible patterns of volatility and even political alignments in post-communist polities.

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