PARTY POLITICS VOL 11. No.2 pp. 243–263

Copyright © 2005 SAGE Publications London ▪ Thousand Oaks ▪ New Delhi
www.sagepublications.com

PATTERNS OF STABILITY

Party Competition and Strategy in Central Europe since 1989

Elisabeth Bakke and Nick Sitter

ABSTRACT

During the decade and a half since the collapse of communism in 1989, the four Central European states have achieved a remarkable degree of party system stability, confounding pessimistic predictions about unstable competition, weak parties and limited institutionalization. This stability, and variations within the region, raises important questions about party system stability and change. The present article explores the patterns of party competition in Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and finds that party system stability is largely a function of party strategy. The broadly successful strategies of former communist and new social democratic parties have stabilized the left wing of the systems in the first three cases, whereas the Slovak left has struggled. However, while efforts to define and dominate the centre–right have yielded some stabilization in Hungary and the Czech Republic, similar efforts in Poland have been less decisive. In Slovakia, the struggle against Mečiar has eclipsed other bloc-building strategies, and accounts for much of the instability. In both Poland and Slovakia, relatively open electoral systems in the early years worked against unitary strategies, at least for some parties. However, apart from this, constraints on party strategy were weak in the first decade, and many strategies were attempted. In such a context, party strategy therefore becomes a particularly powerful explanation of differences in patterns of party system stability.

KEY WORDS ▪ Central Europe ▪ party ▪ party strategy ▪ party systems ▪ system change

Four or five competitive multiparty elections have yielded different patterns of party system stability in the Visegrád four: Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Whereas the Czech and Hungarian party systems are made up almost exclusively of long-standing parties, the Polish party

1354-0688[DOI: 10.1177/1354068805049779]

system has seen stability only on the post-regime side of the spectrum and the Slovak party system has seen turnover in parties on both sides of the main national-populist–civic-democratic divide, albeit with a stable core. Nevertheless, the region as a whole has proved to be more stable than many commentators and analysts expected in the early 1990s.

With the benefit of hindsight, the reasons for this unexpected stability are quite simple. First, post-communist society was not an 'atomized and decapitated mass of ex-clients of state socialism' (Offe et al., 1998: 25). The *tabula rasa* never existed. The Visegrád four (and most other post-communist countries) have at least one dominant conflict dimension that structures party competition and cooperation, although cleavages in a strict sense may be harder to come by.[1] Second, the development of party systems did not start from scratch. In every country, some parties and movements had a head start – namely former regime parties and opposition movements: Solidarity in Poland, Civic Forum and Public against Violence in Czechoslovakia and the Opposition Roundtable in Hungary. Third, electoral systems regulate party competition and help restrict the size of the party systems. As Sarah Birch (2003) has pointed out, the electoral systems of Central and Eastern Europe are doing much more 'work' than their Western counterparts in this respect.

In the last instance, party strategy has played a crucial role in the stabilization of party systems in Central Europe. In few, if any, other cases have the main players of the political game been quite so free to elaborate the new institutional framework and explore and experiment with different strategies for competition – within the parameters of electoral rules, voter alignment and parties' organizational resources, of course. Party strategy is therefore also important in order to explain the *variations* in party system stability *within* this region, and this is precisely what we set out to do in the present article. Both concepts, party strategy and party system change, have become increasingly precisely defined in the comparative literature, allowing further investigation of the relationship between them.

According to the classical party politics literature, a party's key aims are the pursuit of (a) votes and (b) office (Downs, 1957; Riker, 1962). This has since been supplemented by a focus on (c) the importance of internal party management and organizational survival (Panebianco, 1988), and (d) the pursuit of policy, which in turn shapes both coalition games and the pursuit of votes (Budge and Laver, 1986; de Swaan, 1973; Dunleavy, 1991). The key problem is that maximizing one goal may entail merely satisfying another, or even fully-blown trade-offs, and it is here that the dilemmas of party strategy lie (Müller and Strom, 1999; Strom, 1990). Party strategy may therefore be defined as the link between goals and their achievement, a formula for how a party is going to compete.

Likewise, the party systems literature has developed from classifying party systems in terms of numbers and parties' relative size (Blondel, 1968; Duverger, 1954) to an increased focus on the relationship between parties

(Sartori, 1976; Smith, 1966). The first and most obvious building-block of a party system is therefore the political party, defined here along Sartori's lines as an organization that seeks to propel its candidates into parliament, and usually government, in order to pursue specific policy goals. However, the second element is *systematic* interaction between the parties, which suggests that a stable party system features not only stable parties but stable patterns of interaction (Mair, 1997). Party system stability *may* therefore be compatible with a degree of electoral volatility, particularly if it occurs within rather than across blocs (Bartolini and Mair, 1990). If the focus on patterns of competition is extended to include the forms of competition between government and opposition (Smith, 1979, 1989), this yields an operationalization of party system change along two dimensions: change in the (number and strength of) actual party organizations in a particular party system, and changes in the patterns of bloc competition and dynamics of government–opposition relationships.

The present article explores the links between party strategies and party system stability in post-communist Central Europe. The four cases chosen share important similarities in terms of the starting point for development of political parties, featuring successor communist parties, parties that emerged from the opposition movements, revived historical parties, and efforts to build entirely new party organizations; as well as considerable variation in the type and scope of party system stability. Section 1 overviews patterns of stability and party competition in the Visegrád four on the eve of European Union membership along the two dimensions indicated above. In subsequent sections we turn to explorations and comparisons of the different strategies adopted by different types of parties, as well as the effect of institutions. The central argument is that a wide range of strategies has been attempted, and successful strategies have led to two-bloc competition between a relatively stable centre–left and consolidated right in Hungary and the Czech Republic, and thus yielding more stable party systems than in Poland and Slovakia.

1. Party and Party System Stability in Central Europe: An Overview

During their first decade-and-a-half, the Central European party systems defied a range of gloomy predictions of instability and volatility. From 'exceptionalist' perspectives it was argued that post-communist party system developments would differ considerably from those elsewhere in Europe because of weaker organizational and electoral bases (Curry, 1993; Rivera, 1996; Rose, 1996; von Beyme, 1994). Some argued that post-communist party system developments reflected patterns of government and 'opposition' during late communism (Geddes, 1995; Kitschelt et al., 1999); others focused on the paths of liberalization and democratization (Linz and

Stepan, 1996; Offe et al., 1998). In either case, scholars expected problems related to consolidation and stabilization of patterns of party competition, if not of the very regimes. Even analyses that drew explicitly on West European politics warned of the obstacles to Western-style stabilization, let alone the kind of party system freezing that Lipset and Rokkan (1967) wrote about (Ágh, 1998; Kitschelt, 1992; Körösenyi, 1993; Lewis, 1994; Mair, 1997; Pridham and Lewis, 1996; Smith, 1993).

In fact, the number of parties has stabilized, and most of the current relevant political parties were established in the run-up to or shortly after the first free elections. The main exceptions are found in Poland and Slovakia, especially in the form of populist parties. This process of stabilization has entailed a number of parties falling by the wayside, and for various reasons. Stabilization is therefore not taken to mean that the systems have not changed, let alone that the parties have not adapted, but rather that the patterns of party competition and alliances (interaction) have become more stable over time (Mair, 1997).

In terms of the sheer continuity of actual political parties, Hungary is the most stable case. In October 1989 the Communist Party adopted a social democratic platform and was renamed the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSzP). The first opposition party, the Christian national Magyar Democratic Forum (MDF) had been established in 1987. The liberal forces in the Alliance of Young Democrats (Fidesz) and the Alliance of Free Democrats (SzDSz) followed suit in 1988. These three formed the core of the Opposition Roundtable. Fidesz would later take a turn to the right, and become the largest centre–right party. In addition to these four parties, the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP) and the historical Independent Smallholders' Party (FKgP) were represented in parliament until 1998 and 2002, respectively. The only party established after 1990 that has been represented in parliament (between 1994 and 2002) is the right extremist party MIEP (formed by MDF expellees). Yet, stability in terms of party organizations is no guarantee of stable *patterns of interaction between parties*. Here, Hungary has featured the most significant change in the shape of Fidesz's turn to the right in 1995. This inaugurated the shift from a three-bloc system to a two-bloc system, with Fidesz and MDF on the centre–right facing a coalition between SzDSz and MSzP on the centre–left.

Next to Hungary, the Czech Republic features the most stable party system. Four of the five current parliamentary parties were established by 1991, and the Scandinavian-style pattern of left–right competition that emerged in the mid-1990s has stabilized. On the far left, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) is the orthodox successor party of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, which split along national lines in October 1990. The historical Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) usurped the liberal centre–left after a period of centrist fission and fusion in the early 1990s. The dominant party on the right is the liberal-conservative Civic Democratic Party (ODS), which formed through splits in Civic Forum

in 1991. However, two smaller parties cooperating in the 'Coalition' occupy the centre–right. The Christian Democratic Union–Czechoslovak People's Party (KDU–ČSL) is the result of a merger between Christian democratic currents and a former satellite party in 1991, while the junior partner in the coalition, the Freedom Union (US), broke out of ODS after a corruption scandal in late 1997. Its 2001 merger with the Democratic Union produced the US–DEU. In addition to this stable core, three parties served two terms in parliament before fading: the Moravian movement HSD–SMS between 1990 and 1996, and the nationalist Republican Party and Civic Democratic Alliance (ODA), a splinter from Civic Forum, between 1992 and 1998.

In the Czech and Hungarian cases, party system stabilization was a process in which parties struggled to define and dominate the centre–left and centre–right. In both cases this was accomplished by the mid- to late 1990s, albeit with different outcomes. The left is dominated by the social democrat ČSSD and the MSzP, which bear considerable similarities despite their different origins. However, the contest on the right produced a victory for the liberal-conservative ODS in the Czech case, but in Hungary the Christian national right in the shape of post-1995 Fidesz and the MDF. In Hungary, Fidesz's new strategy was partly predicated on the Free Democrats SzDSz joining the MSzP in a governing coalition after the 1994 election, thus opening the way for two-bloc competition.

In Poland, the old regime parties have proved relatively resilient. The Communists adopted a social democratic platform in January 1990 and joined other former regime organizations in the Alliance of the Democratic Left (SLD) before the 1991 election, and went on to become a single party in 1999.[2] For the 2001 election it formed an alliance with the left socialist Labour Union (UP), the only party with explicit roots in both Solidarity and the former communist ruling party. The Polish Peasant Party (PSL) is the heir to one of the former satellite parties, which adopted the name of an inter-war peasant party in 1990.

Table 1. Major parliamentary parties

	Hungary	*Czech Republic*	*Poland*	*Slovakia*
Former Communist and/or Social Dem.	**MSzP**	**KSČM** **ČSSD**	**SLD** **UP**	SDĽ KSS (Smer)
Liberal Forum parties	**SzDSz**	ODA, US-DEU	UD, KLD, UW, PO	
Christian National Forum parties*	**Fidesz**, **MDF**	**ODS**	ZChN, AWS, PiS, LPR	**HZDS**
Third parties	KNDP, FKgP	**KDU-ČSL**, HSD-SMS	**PSL**, Samoobrona	**KDH**, **MKP**, ANO, SDKÚ
Far right	MIEP	Republicans	miscellaneous	**SNS**

Stable long-standing parties in bold, in parliament today underlined.

* This label does not apply to the Czech and Slovak cases. ODS is liberal-conservative, while HZDS is national-populist and left of centre in economic politics.

In contrast, frequent splits and mergers have plagued the post-Solidarity side of the party system. The heirs of Solidarity's liberal, intellectual dissident wing, the Liberal Democratic Congress (KLD) and Democratic Union (UD), later to become the Freedom Union (UW), had a fairly stable following in the 1990s, but failed in the 2001 election after many of its market liberals left to join the new Civic Platform (PO). On the national clerical wing, an array of small parties gave way to Solidarity Election Action (AWS) before the 1997 election, but this electoral alliance fell apart before the 2001 election. Three of the four new parties in parliament are populist parties of the national clerical right: Self-defence (Samoobrona), Law and Justice (PiS) and the League of Polish Families (LPR). However, despite low organizational stability on the right, Poland's blocs have perhaps been the most stable in the region, and coalition-building has been driven by questions about how to deal with the communist past, or what Holm-Hansen (2002) calls *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.

Finally, Slovakia may be described as the least stable of the four systems, for two reasons: like Poland, Slovakia has been characterized by party fissions and a steady flow of new populist parties; more importantly, however, bloc competition is still in the making. In contrast to Poland and Hungary, the old regime party has failed to acquire a central role in the party system, despite the fact that the Slovak communists adopted a social democratic platform after parting with their Czech comrades in October 1990. The resulting Democratic Left Party (SDĽ) never exceeded 15 percent and fell below the electoral threshold in 2002, at the same time as an orthodox communist party (KSS) that had been re-established in 1991 won parliamentary representation. Instead, the party system in Slovakia was centred on Vladimír Mečiar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), the heir of Public against Violence. Three other long-standing parties had roots in the pre-1989 opposition and were established already before the first free election: the nationalist Slovak National Party (SNS), which became junior partner in Mečiar's national-populist governments in the 1990s;[3] the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH); and the ethnic Hungarian parties that eventually merged in the Magyar Coalition Party (MKP). Party organizations have been more stable than in Poland, but otherwise, shifting electoral alliances and new populist parties characterize the Slovak political scene. Before the 2002 election, two new populist parties were formed: the centre–left *Smer* (Direction), led by a former SDĽ MP (Robert Fico); and the centre–right Alliance for the New Citizen (ANO), led by a TV personality.

The pattern of party competition is the key to the fragility of the Slovak left as well as to the relative instability of the Slovak party system. While Czechoslovakia was still around, the counterpart to HZDS was the Czech ODS. After independence, this Czecho–Slovak two-bloc system was succeeded by a unipolar system with HZDS as the dominant party. Efforts to oust Mečiar shaped coalition-building as well as party formation in the

1990s. Before the 1998 election, the anti-Mečiar, civic-democratic opposition formed two composite parties: the MKP and the Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK). After winning the election, this opposition formed a rainbow coalition which included the SDL' and a populist party.

However, apart from being against Mečiar, the members of this civic-democratic coalition had little in common. In 2000, the circle around Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda established the centre–right Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKÚ), after failing to turn the SDK into a normal party. After the 2002 election, the original rainbow coalition was turned into a coalition of centre–right parties (KDH, SDKÚ, and MKP), with the addition of ANO. This was predicated on the electoral failure of the SDL'. As of early 2004, the centre–left *Smer* has taken over HZDS's mantle as the most popular (opposition) party in Slovakia, which may seem to suggest a stabilization of two-bloc competition along a left–right dimension, gradually replacing the inherently unstable yet enduring 'Mečiar-and-allies versus the rest' pattern.

In short, stability in terms of the number of parliamentary parties was achieved in all Central European countries around the second or third election. This even holds for Poland and Slovakia. The number of real and effective parties is set out in Appendix 1. Stability in terms of *actual parties* was achieved in Hungary and the Czech Republic in the latter half of the 1990s, while more or less populist newcomers still keep popping up on the Polish national clerical right and in Slovakia. Stability in terms of *bloc competition* has been highest in Poland, where post-Solidarity parties face post-regime parties, while Hungary saw a shift from a three-bloc to a two-bloc system in the mid-1990s. After Czechoslovakia's demise, the original national-cum-economic dimension was converted into a socio-economic left–right dimension in the Czech Republic, resulting in Scandinavian-type competition. In Slovakia, the HZDS dominated the national-populist pole against an unstable anti-Mečiar coalition, but the civic-democratic parties are now aligning along a more West European left–right pattern.

Finally, although some commentators point to a remarkably high level of electoral volatility in the region as a source of party system instability (Rose, 1996), aggregate electoral volatility is in fact a red herring as far as party system stability is concerned. Since 1989 the volatility has only been about twice the West European average (Table 3). Populist newcomers admittedly

Table 2. Party system (in)stability in Central Europe

	Stable bloc competition	*Unstable blocs*
Stable set of parties	The Czech Republic Hungary since 1995	Hungary 1989–1994
Parties change	Poland (particularly the right) Czechoslovakia 1989–92	 Slovakia

Table 3. Volatility in Central Europe

	1.–2. election	*2.–3. election*	*3.–4. election*	*4.–5. election*	*Average*	*Region average*
Poland	34.3	21.3	51.1		35.6	
Czech Republic	15.5	24.2	16.3	13.0	17.3	25.5
Slovakia	22.1	20.6	20.3	30.3	23.3	
Hungary	26.8	31.6	19.1		25.8	

Source: Own calculations. In order not to inflate the volatility artificially, parties that split up or merged between elections are treated as one bloc. The West European average (1990–1994) was 12.5 percent (Lane and Ersson, 1996: 131). For the Baltic states, see Bakke (2002: 237).

account for much of the increased volatility in the last elections in Poland and Slovakia. Yet social democratic growth accounted for much of the volatility in the Czech Republic between the second and third elections, and part of the volatility in every Polish election. Likewise, between the first and second Hungarian elections high electoral volatility reflected the advance of the social democratic MSzP. Between the second and the third election it was caused by the liberal Fidesz's successful shift to the Christian national right. In short, electoral volatility was an integral feature of the process of party system development and consolidation in the region in the 1990s, and it is therefore not a particularly good indicator (let alone cause) of party system (in)stability.

The subsequent sections therefore return to the development of party strategy and the battles to shape the main alternative coalitions, as well as the institutional parameters that shaped these battles. Starting from patterns of transition and new institutions, the following section suggests that the clues to the differences within Central Europe are found in the strategic choices made by key parties during the first decade of multiparty competition.

2. Transitions, Institutional Choice and Institutionalization

Institutions are important for two reasons: first, early institutional compromises as well as later changes reflect the balance of power between the main parties at the time. This is especially true of the institutional variable that directly affects party competition, the electoral system. Second, and more importantly in our context, once in place, institutions help shape subsequent political contests.

First to the matter of institutional choice: the starting point was similar in all four (or then, three) countries; everywhere, the regime phalanx faced broad opposition movements. In a situation when the party systems were still in the making and it was uncertain who would emerge as winners and losers, it seemed rational to choose PR (Lijphart, 1992). It was typically the

(ex-)communist elites who advocated this as a safeguard against total loss of power, except in Hungary, where the communists (erroneously) thought they had more to gain in single-member districts and secured a complicated mixed system, where 176 of 386 mandates are elected in single-member districts.

Three of the four cases are now relatively similar, featuring PR systems with 5 percent thresholds (Table 4). This conforms to the overall European pattern (Bakke, 2002: 233; Birch, 2003: 17). The basic *electoral systems* have remained unchanged in all four countries. In Hungary, the only change was the increase in the threshold from 4 to 5 percent in 1994. However, the electoral formulas and *thresholds* of the other three countries have changed several times, making the systems less proportional than in the early 1990s. This is hardly surprising, considering that change is driven by the (relatively) stable parties in power.

The overall effect of the changes in the electoral systems has been to stabilize competition, as electoral threshold has been raised. Thresholds restrict competition, force elites and voters to concentrate on parties that are large enough to win seats, and make forming new parties riskier. Declining electoral fragmentation (Appendix 1) and a lower share of 'wasted votes' (i.e. for parties that do not gain representation; Figure 1) suggest that a 'learning effect' has occurred. In the Slovak case, the peak in the share of wasted votes in the 2002 election mainly reflects the Slovak National Party's split into two equal factions, neither of which crossed the threshold (although they polled 7 percent combined).

There were, however, some important initial differences between the PR systems of the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland, which in part accounts for the different effects on party system stabilization. In the Czech Republic, the 5 percent threshold combined with a restrictive electoral formula (Hagenbach-Bischoff) had a similar effect as the mixed electoral system in Hungary; by discouraging fractionalization in the early states of multiparty politics, the electoral systems contributed to early stabilization. In Slovakia

Table 4. Electoral systems in Central Europe (2002)

		Election formula for		*Electoral threshold for*	
	Electoral system	*district mandates*	*national lists*	*parties*	*coalitions*
Poland	PR	Mod. St.Laguë (2001)	–	5%	8%
Czech Republic	PR	d'Hondt (2002)	–	5%	10–20%
Slovakia	PR	Hagenbach-Bischoff	–	5%	7–10%
Hungary	Mixed	Hagenbach-Bischoff	d'Hondt	*5%	

* The electoral threshold only applies to the PR part of the election system. Parties that obtain mandates in single-member districts get to keep them. *Source*: Bakke (2002).

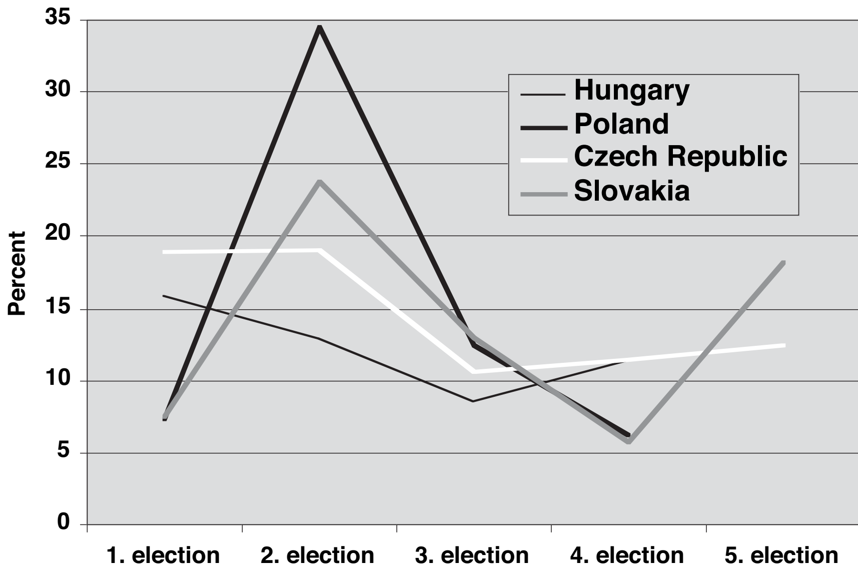

Figure 1. Wasted votes in Central Europe

and Poland, however, a more liberal electoral formula (Hare) and lower or no threshold in the first free elections allowed a range of independent parties to develop as the opposition movements fragmented.

The interplay between the institutional factor and the enlightened self-interest of the new political elites was particularly fateful in Poland. The semi-free 1989 election was held according to the communist system of plurality elections in single-member constituencies. However, by the time the first free election was held in 1991, Solidarity had disintegrated and the former communists doubted their own electoral potential. Consequently, a very proportional PR system was designed. The price was a tide of small parties: 111 ran for election and 29 won representation in the lower house. The introduction of a formal threshold and the more restrictive d'Hondt method in 1993 helped stabilize the number of parties, but sent the share of wasted votes skyrocketing (Figure 1). Even the fragmented Polish national clerical right was forced to cooperate (in AWS) in the 1997 election – which it won. However, as the AWS began to fall apart, new changes were designed in 2001 to accommodate smaller and medium-sized parties. This suggests that, in Poland, institutional change was as much the consequence of party system instability as the cause. Moreover, the very different development of the two wings of Solidarity, where the liberals consolidated much further than the Christian nationals, suggests that the impact of initially low electoral thresholds should not be exaggerated.

In Slovakia, the 3 percent threshold allowed two extra parties into the National Council in the 1990 election. The peak in the share of wasted votes

in the second election reflects the introduction of a less proportional formula (Hagenbach-Bischoff) and a 5 percent threshold. This in turn forced the smaller parties into electoral coalitions, and before the 1998 election the increase in the threshold for electoral coalitions prompted their mergers into composite parties, although only the Magyar Coalition Party (MKP) was to last. Early separate organization and the liberal rules in the first election probably facilitated the survival of party *organizations*. Yet, the Slovak case also indicates some of the difficulties inherent in attempting to combat party system fragmentation by tightening electoral rules: existing parties may circumvent thresholds by forming electoral alliances or 'composite parties' (as evident in 1990s' Italy (D'Alimonte and Bartolini, 1997); for a theoretical discussion, see Cox, 1997).

If early electoral rules allow many parties a degree of success, 'vested interests' politically and personally may make it difficult to merge with ideologically related parties at a later point. Electoral design is hardly the only source of instability in Poland and Slovakia, but it helped consolidate relatively independent parties that have since found cooperation more challenging than have the different factions that make up the main Czech and Hungarian parties (Lewis, 1996).

3. Post-Communist Parties and the New Centre–Left

Despite the broad negative association with communism, the 'left' was there for the taking for the former communist parties in the early 1990s. Where they reformed and assimilated to their West European social democrat counterparts they have come to dominate the left side of the spectrum. Only where the reform wings lost the internal battle (the Czech case) have these parties given way to strong historical social democratic parties. Their degree of success has depended on a combination of reform and electoral appeal, combined with organizational strength and elite skills (Grzymala-Busse, 2002), as well as coalition strategies. Starting from very different positions, social democratic parties have established themselves as the key players on the left in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland (Figure 2).

The Polish SLD and the Hungarian MSzP represent the clearest cases of successful transformation from communist party to modern catch-all social democrats. Both secured relatively early returns to power, in 1993 and 1994, respectively, and maintained or accelerated their predecessors' economic transition programmes. In both cases the victory of the liberal wing came at the price of tension during the first coalition governments, and several high-profile resignations over economic policy (Sitter, 2001). The main difference lies in their coalition strategies. The MSzP's coalition to the right with the liberal SzDSz exacerbated the internal conflict, and much of the rationale for the coalition lay in the MSzP right wing's quest to consolidate its own position within the party (which enjoyed a majority

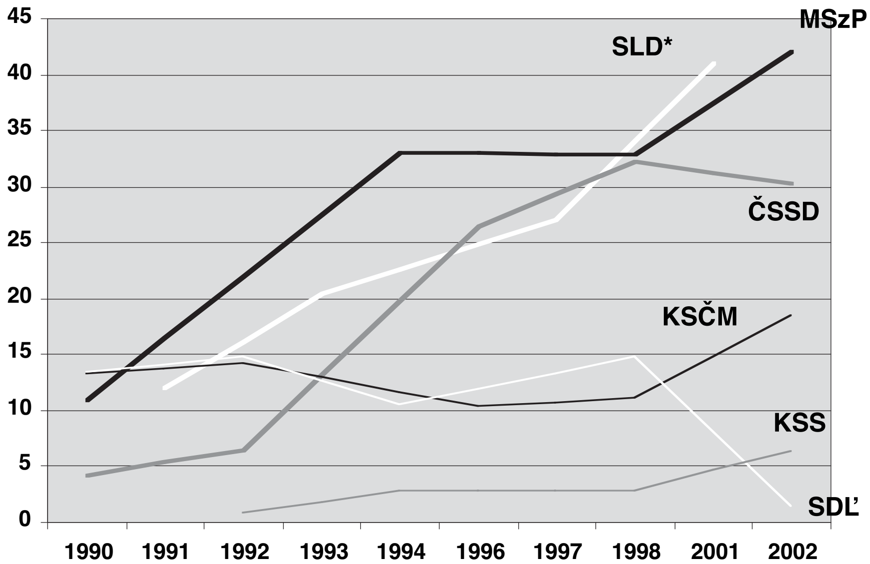

Figure 2. Left parties in the Visegrád four

in parliament alone). The MSzP right correctly assessed that if it were allied with the SzDSz it would be able to defeat its own left wing. By contrast, the SLD allied to its left, with the more interventionist peasant party PSL. Consequently, most coalition tensions occurred between rather than within the parties, and the SLD could threaten to look to the liberal centre–right for a potential alternative coalition partner.

The Czech communist party was the only communist party to retain an orthodox platform and survive as a politically relevant, albeit isolated, party. This became abundantly clear after the 2002 election, when the Czech social democrats preferred to rule with the centre–right parties in the Coalition, in spite of a solid socialist majority. Not having to compete with reformed communists, the historical Czech social democrats ČSSD went on to occupy the centre–left. Once Czechoslovakia became history and the national-cum-economic divide which had dominated Czechoslovak politics faded, the social democrats were instrumental in forging socio-economic left–right competition by presenting itself as the major alternative to the centre–right coalitions, confronting Klaus's governments from the *centre*–left. As in Hungary, this meant that competition between two relatively clear-cut alternatives stabilized in the second half of the 1990s.

Competition between government and opposition also accounts for much of the reformed ex-communists in SDĽ's fortunes in Slovakia, for better and for worse. They won an easy victory over the historical Slovak social democrats in the bid for the left, but subsequent electoral fortunes have gone from moderate to disastrous in the 2002 election. Like most Slovak parties, the

SDĽ fell in-between the ODS and the HZDS on key questions before the Velvet Divorce. Unlike the other ex-communist parties, the SDĽ faced a strong opponent with centre–left economic policies in the HZDS. After independence, the SDĽ leadership vacillated between supporting Mečiar and the opposition, before joining the rainbow coalition and becoming a government party in 1998. The failure of the SDĽ was partly due to the liberal economic policies of the first Dzurinda government, leadership changes and the establishment of *Smer*. The success of the Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS) in the 2002 election was due to last-minute leftist support in the absence of a social democrat alternative.

4. Defining and Consolidating the 'Right'

Since the reformed communist parties tended to define the left, the parties that emerged from the opposition movements have come to define the 'right' in post-communist party systems, albeit sometimes confusingly because some of them have adopted socio-economic agendas that are normally associated with the left. The competition over which factions would define the right was fought out most clearly in the Hungarian case, between the liberal (often labelled democratic) and Christian national (labelled populist) pre-1989 opposition camps. But Poland and the Czech Republic saw similar competition over who would dominate, and therefore define, the right. Where this contest was conclusive by the mid-1990s (Hungary and the Czech Republic) the party system stabilized, whereas this competition continues to characterize the Polish centre–right and right.

The Hungarian populist camp, in the form of the democratic forum MDF, the Christian democrat KDNP and the smallholders' FKgP, appeared to win this competition at an early stage. However, by the time of the 1994 election the MDF and FKgP leaderships had manifestly failed to manage their respective parties and maintain party unity. At the same time the liberal parties' aspirations to take over the centre–right's mantle were quashed after their relatively poor 1994 election performance. With the free democrat SzDSz forming a centre–left government with the MSzP, Viktor Orbán's young democrat Fidesz capitalized on the three Christian national parties' splits over how to react to the defeat (to move right or centre). Moving sharply into the Christian national space in 1995, and absorbing factions from the MDF and KDNP over the next two years, Fidesz was in a position to launch its successful bid for office in 1998 (Sitter, 2001). The result has been the stabilization of a two-bloc party system, with the former liberal parties divided into the centre–left and centre–right. Fidesz even crowded out the extreme right MIEP in the closely fought 2002 election.

In the Czech case, the contest within Civic Forum was between the dissident wing, which wanted to retain a movement party comprising multiple ideological currents, and the so-called managers around Václav Klaus, who

explicitly wanted to turn Civic Forum into a 'normal' liberal-conservative party with a strong party organization – a contest Klaus won (Hanley, 1999). The Civic Movement and Civic Democratic Alliance then split off. After this restructuring of the forum, the ODS was able to establish itself as the major force on the Czech side in the 1992 election, combining the role of champion of economic reform with a strong federalist stance vis-a-vis the Slovaks. After the election the ODS became the leading force in a centre–right government that also included the KDU–ĆSL and ODA, while the Civic Movement fell below the threshold.

In both cases, the contests as to which parties would dominate and define the post-forum centre–right shaped party system consolidation on the right. The keys lie in Klaus and Orbán's strategies for electoral competition and coalition games, as well as their policies and the strength of the party organization that they built up in the early 1990s. Both took advantage of their opponents' difficulties in combining in an alternative coalition, and in the SzDSz case its coalition with the left. Furthermore, both capitalized on their opponents' internal divisions and, particularly in the case of Civic Movement, their disastrous elitist appeal.

The Polish struggle among the former opposition parties reflects elements of both the Hungarian and Czech contests, but has not produced a clear winner. The former trade union wing of Solidarity, which finally united in the AWS before the 1997 election, achieved some dominance on the fragmented Christian national right, while the more liberal Western-oriented wing associated with the intellectuals in Solidarity, including Michnik, Mazowiecki and Balcerowicz, has maintained a considerable presence in the form of the Liberal Democratic Congress KLD and Democratic UD (which merged into the Freedom Union UW) and the Civic Platform PO. Although the two camps have negotiated a series of coalition governments, these have been even more divided that the SLD–PSL coalitions and no party has emerged dominant. Unlike Klaus, Mazowiecki and Balcerovicz were never able to capitalize on privatization to build electoral support. Yet unlike Orbán, they have been reluctant to adopt a Christian national or populist agenda and attempt to usurp the populist right. Whether they had the personal power to opt for such strategies may be an open question; in any case they lacked the solid party organization that Klaus and his managers strove to build (Lewis, 1996). Meanwhile, the Christian national right has ended up splitting over how far to support radical economic transition when in government; they have been unable to build a credible coalition alternative except in 1997 and then unable to capitalize on it.

Unlike Poland and Hungary, Slovakia did not have a stable ex-communist anchoring party on the left, and the outcome of the contest within Public against Violence was quite different from the Czech case. The liberal dissident wing was admittedly in both cases hung out to dry in the 1992 election; however, while Václav Klaus led his 'managers' to the right and turned ODS into a normal party, Vladimír Mečiar's Movement for a Democratic

Slovakia is usually described in the literature as a national-populist 'non-standard' party. In contrast to all the other post-Forum parties, HZDS is 'left of centre' in economic questions, and does not belong to the right in any conventional sense.

The key to the differences between the Czech and the Slovak case is the composition of the opposition forces in combination with the cleavage structure and party strategies. First, the pre-1989 opposition in Slovakia had been more fragmented than the Czech (Pešek and Szomolányi, 2000), and after the Velvet Revolution, the Catholic, Slovak national and ethnic Hungarian factions organized separately, while the nationally oriented reform communists from 1968 came to form the core in Public against Violence. The social and ideological composition was therefore different from the Czech case. Second, when Vladimír Mečiar and the national-populist wing went out of Public against Violence in 1991, he took the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia straight into opposition. His successful recipe in the 1992 election was to stand up as the champion of a confederal solution, while at the same time capitalizing on Slovak discontent with the economic reform. After independence, the Slovak system was unipolar, with HZDS dominating the national-populist pole against a motley crew of opposition parties that were forced to cooperate across three lines of division: ethnic, left–right and post-regime–post-opposition. The struggle against Mečiar explains much of the instability in the Slovak party system in the 1990s, from splits in the HZDS, via shifting electoral alliances, to the forming of two composite parties before the 1998 election, and the subsequent founding of SDKÚ in 2000. The 2002 election may prove to be a breaking point, as Slovakia got its first government coalition consisting of parties on the 'centre–right', replacing the rainbow coalition that ousted Mečiar in 1998. With the national-populist parties HZDS and SNS no longer a threat, and a government coalition consisting of parties on the 'centre–right', the left is there for the taking. Robert Fico's populist *Smer* may be a candidate, if its social democrat wing wins out.

5. The Limited Appeal of 'Third' and Protest Parties

Perhaps surprisingly, given the number of such parties that emerged in the early and mid-1990s, 'third' parties – parties that adopt strategies of circumventing or outflanking the main dimension – have played a limited role in the development of Central European party system stability. Denominational parties were established in all four cases; in the Czech case as a coalition including one former satellite party. However, they have generally aligned along the left–right dimension. The Christian National Union (ZChN) and the KDNP formed part of the Christian national blocs in Poland and Hungary, and have since integrated into other right-wing parties. The KDU–ČSL and KDH's strategies of positioning themselves in

the centre and allying with the liberal parties contributed to bloc-building in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Likewise, the two successful agrarian parties, the PSL and the FKgP (until 2001), have become parts of the left and right blocs in Poland and Hungary, respectively, the latter disintegrating despite a strong organizational basis (Batory and Sitter, 2004). Having targeted a clear constituency of considerable size, and adopted policy positions that address its voters' main economic concerns, the PSL comes close to the ideal-type interest-party strategy. Slovakia is the only country that features a national minority sufficiently strong to warrant its own political party, the MKP. Its strategy, representing a minority and defending its interests, has proved to be a recipe for success, and in the 2002 election the party even attracted a number of ethnic Slovak voters (Krivý, 2003: 98–102).

Perhaps the most surprising development is the limited success of extremist strategies on the 'right' flank (they are not necessarily rightist in economic terms). In Hungary, MIEP was to some extent crowded out by Orbán's move to the right and his adoption of a more nationalist and somewhat Eurosceptic stance, although its elimination from parliament in the 2002 election was a close call. In the Czech case, the Republicans lost out more to the left, particularly with the rise of the ČSSD (Vlachová, 1999: 270). Even the Polish nationalist flank parties were integrated into the AWS, leaving the Slovak SNS as the only long-established nationalist flank party of any stature in the region. As of early 2004 the party is again above the electoral threshold. This is no coincidence, since Slovakia is the one country where nationalism has been a main cleavage.

Finally, the instability of populist parties in Poland and Slovakia is inherent in their nature as ideologically diffuse parties, based on populist appeal, often associated with a single individual, and lacking a firm organizational structure. It remains to be seen whether the most recent of these (*Samoobrona*, LPR and PiS in Poland, *Smer* and ANO in Slovakia) will collapse before the next election, or become permanent features of the party systems.

6. Conclusions

The first decade-and-a-half of competitive pluralist party politics has yielded a degree of stability in the four Central European states on the eve of EU membership. However, both the degree and type of stability differ in the four cases, and comparative analysis of this variation yields important clues about the nature and processes of party system stabilization. If party system stability is defined in terms of a combination of stable party organizations and stable patterns of interaction, the Czech and Hungarian party systems have emerged as more stable than their Polish and Slovak counterparts. Yet, even the two more stable systems reached this by different paths: Hungary saw stable parties modify their strategies for competition after the 1994

election; the Czech Republic saw more gradual stabilization of the set of parties, but this was anchored around ODS's consolidation of a strong position on the centre–right and the emergence of a social democrat alternative. Poland, similarly, saw stabilization of two-bloc competition in the 1990s, with party stability on the ex-regime centre–left, but ultimately no consolidation on the centre–right of the kind that Klaus or Orbán carefully built up. Although Slovakia has featured a stable core of parties there has been a degree of discontinuity both in terms of new parties and splits in existing ones, and, more importantly, stable bloc competition might only now be emerging as Mečiar's fortunes fade.

Comparative analysis of the four cases reveals that these different patterns of stabilization have been driven largely by strategic choices made by parties, in terms of what their goals are and how these are best pursued. To be sure, the higher number of parties in Poland and Slovakia at an early stage prompted more proportional electoral systems, which may have reinforced fragmentation. However, the reformed communists in Slovakia also proved far less adept than their Hungarian or Polish counterparts, let alone the Czech Social Democrats, at defining a clear role for themselves or pursuing enduring alliances. On the centre–right, ODS and (after 1995) Fidesz established themselves as the anchors of one side of the party system, albeit adopting different (respectively liberal and more national clerical) strategies. Both parties featured strong leaders that proved capable of taking advantage of their non-socialist competitors' suboptimal strategic choices or divisions. Neither the liberal nor the national clerical successor wings of Solidarity achieved this kind of unity or clear sustained strategies for competition (let alone clear economic policy priorities). Yet the former regime parties acted as an anchor in Polish party competition. In the Slovak case, the struggle against Mečiar and his majoritarian democracy eclipsed other bloc-building strategies. A range of opposition parties that were otherwise divided on strategy could nevertheless agree on the single goal of ousting his government, thus yielding a contingent opposition that is reminiscent of the old anti-communist opposition movements in its diversity. Only after the resolution of the Mečiar question does it look as if more stable left–right competition may be emerging; a development that is in line with findings from Western Europe that left–right coalition competition does not develop until regime questions have been solved (Budge and Keman, 1990). In short, party strategy matters: it shapes the trajectories of, variations in and degrees of party system stabilization.

Notes

This article is partly based on Elisabeth Bakke's *Sentral-Europa og Baltikum etter 1989* (2002). An earlier draft was presented at the 11th Norwegian Political Science Conference in Trondheim, January 2003. We thank participants at the conference and the anonymous referees of this article for helpful comments.

1 The concept of cleavages is mainly associated with Rokkan and Lipset, but was developed by Rokkan and Valen, based on their studies in Norway (Rokkan, 1970). A cleavage is a long-standing set of political conflicts and contains three elements: an 'objective' basis for conflict (e.g. of socio-economic or cultural character), mobilization around this conflict (includes identifying 'us' and 'them'), and organizations that represent the various sides in the conflict (parties, interest organizations). See, for example, Bartolini and Mair (1990) and Aardal (1994).
2 Poland's Social Democracy (SP) broke off from the SLD in April 2004, but it remains to be seen whether this party will become a permanent feature of the Polish party system.
3 The SNS admittedly fell below the electoral threshold in 2002 due to a split in 2001, but seems to have bounced back after the splinter group reunited with the party in June 2003.

References

Aardal, Bernt (1994) 'Hva er en politisk skillelinje? En begrepsmessig grenseopp-gang', *Tidsskrift for samfunnsforskning* 35: 218–49.

Ágh, Attila (1998) *The Politics of Central Europe*. London: Sage.

Bakke, Elisabeth (ed.) (2002) *Sentral-Europa og Baltikum etter 1989*. Oslo: Det Norske Samlaget.

Bartolini, Stefano and Peter Mair (1990) *Identity, Competition, and Electoral Availability: the Stabilization of European Electorates 1885–1985*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Batory, Agnes and Nick Sitter (2004) 'Cleavages, Competition, and Coalition-building: Agrarian Parties and the European Question in Western and Eastern Europe', *The European Journal of Political Research* 43: 521–44.

Birch, Sarah (2003) 'Electoral Systems and Party Systems in Europe East and West', in Paul Lewis and Paul Webb (eds) *Pan-European Perspectives on Party Politics*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.

Blondel, Jean (1968) 'Party Systems and Patterns of Government in Western Democracies', *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 1: 180–203.

Budge, Ian and Hans Keman (1990) *Parties and Democracy: Coalition Formation and Government Functioning in Twenty States*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Budge, Ian and Michael J. Laver (1986) 'Office Seeking and Policy Pursuit in Coalition Theory', *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 11: 485–506.

Cox, Gary W. (1997) *Making Votes Count: Strategic Coordination in the World's Electoral Systems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Curry, Jane L. (1993) 'Pluralism in East Central Europe: Not Will it Last, but What is it?' *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 26: 446–61.

D'Alimonte, Roberto and Stefano Bartolini (1997) ' "Electoral Transition" and Party System Change in Italy', *West European Politics* 20: 110–34.

de Swaan, Abram (1973) *Coalition Theories and Cabinet Formation*. Amsterdam: Elsevier.

Downs, Anthony (1957) *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. New York: Harper & Row.

Dunleavy, Patrick (1991) *Democracy, Bureaucracy and Public Choice: Economic Explanations in Political Science*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Duverger, Maurice (1954) *Political Parties: Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State*. London: Methuen.

Geddes, Barbara (1995) 'A Comparative Perspective on the Leninist Legacy in Eastern Europe', *Comparative Political Studies* 28: 239–74.

Grzymala-Busse, Anna (2002) 'The Programmatic Turnaround of Communist Successor Parties in East Central Europe, 1989–1998', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 35: 51–66.

Hanley, Sean (1999) 'The New Right in Europe? Unravelling the Ideology of "Czech Thatcherism"', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 4: 169–78.

Holm-Hansen, Jørn (2002) 'Polsk politikk 1989 til 2001: Ingen start på bar bakke', in Elisabeth Bakke (ed.) *Sentral-Europa og Baltikum etter 1989*. Oslo: Det Norske Samlaget.

Kitschelt, Herbert (1992) 'The Formation of Party Systems in East Central Europe', *Politics and Society* 20: 7–50.

Kitschelt, Herbert, Zdenka Mansfeldova, Radoslaw Markowski and Gabor Toká (1999) *Post-Communist Party Systems: Competition, Representation and Inter-Party Cooperation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Körösenyi, András (1993) 'Stable or Fragile Democracy? Political Cleavages and Party System in Hungary', *Government and Opposition* 28: 87–104.

Krivý, Vladimír (2003) 'Election Results and Trends', in Grigorij Mesežnikov et al. (eds) *Slovak Elections 2002*. Bratislava: Institute for Public Affairs.

Lane, Jan-Erik and Svante O. Ersson (1996) *European Politics. An Introduction*. London: Sage.

Lewis, Paul G. (1994) 'Democratization and Party Development in Eastern Europe', *Party Politics* 1: 391–405.

Lewis, Paul G. (ed.) (1996) *Party Structure and Organisation in East Central Europe*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Lijphart, Arend (1992) 'Democratisation and Constitutional Choice in Czecho-Slovakia, Hungary and Poland 1989–91', *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 4: 207–23.

Linz, Juan and Alfred Stepan (1996) *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation. Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Lipset, Seymour Martin and Stein Rokkan (1967) 'Cleavage Structures, Party Systems and Voter Alignments: an Introduction', in S. M. Lipset and S. Rokkan (eds) *Party Systems and Voter Alignments*. New York: Free Press.

Mair, Peter (1997) *Party System Change. Approaches and Interpretations*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Müller, Wolfgang C. and Kaare Strom (1999) 'Political Parties and Hard Choices', in Wolfgang C. Müller and Kaare Strom (eds) *Policy, Office or Votes? How Parties in Western Europe Make Hard Decisions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Offe, Claus, Jon Elster and Ulrich K. Preuss (1998) *Institutional Design in Post-communist Societies: Rebuilding the Ship at Sea*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Panebianco, Angelo (1988) *Political Parties: Organisation and Power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pešek, Jan and Soňa Szomolányi (2000) *November 1989 na Slovensku. Súvislosti, predpoklady a dôsledky. Štúdie a úvahy.* Bratislava: Nadácia Milana Šimečku.

Pridham, Geoffrey and Paul G. Lewis (eds) (1996) *Stabilising Fragile Democracies: Comparing New Party Systems in Southern and Eastern Europe*. London: Routledge.
Riker, William (1962) *The Theory of Political Coalitions*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
Rivera, Sharon W. (1996) 'Historical Cleavages or Transition Mode: Influences on the Emerging Party Systems in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia', *Party Politics* 2: 177–208.
Rokkan, Stein (1970) *Citizens, Elections, Parties: Approaches to the Comparative Study of the Processes of Development*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
Rose, Richard (1996) 'Mobilizing Demobilized Voters in Post-Communist Societies', *Party Politics* 1: 549–63.
Sartori, Giovanni (1976) *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Sitter, Nick (2001) 'Beyond Class vs. Nation: Cleavage Structures and Party Competition in East Central Europe', *Central European Political Science Review* 2: 67–91.
Smith, Gordon (1966) 'What is a Party System?' *Parliamentary Affairs* 19: 351–62.
Smith, Gordon (1979) 'Western European Party Systems: On the Trail of a Typology', *West European Politics* 2: 128–43.
Smith, Gordon (1989) 'A Systems Perspective on Party System Change', *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 1: 349–63.
Smith, Gordon (1993) 'Transitions to Liberal Democracy', in S. Whitefield (ed.) *The New Institutional Architecture of Eastern Europe*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
Strom, Kaare (1990) 'A Behavioral Theory of Competitive Political Parties', *American Journal of Political Science* 34: 565–98.
Vlachová, Klára (1999) 'The Crystallization of Political Attitudes and Orientations', in Jiří Večerník and Petr Matějů (eds) *Ten Years of Rebuilding Capitalism: Czech Society after 1989*. Prague: Academia.
von Beyme, Klaus (1994) *Systemwechsel in Osteuropa*. Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp.
Election results: see the homepage of the Project on Political Transformation and the Electoral Process in Post-Communist Europe at the University of Essex. Available at: <http://www.essex.ac.uk/elections/> [21 November 2003].

Appendix 1. Effective parties in Central Europe: electoral and parliamentary

	1. election	*2. election*	*3. election*	*4. election*	*5. election*
Poland, based on mandates	1991: 10.9	1993: 3.9	1997: 3.0	2001: 3.6	
– based on votes	13.9	9.8	4.6	4.5	
– actual number of parties/coalitions	29	7	6	7	
Czech Republic, based on mandates	1990: 2.2	1992: 4.8	1996: 4.1	1998: 3.7	2002: 3.7
– based on votes	3.5	7.3	5.3	4.7	4.8
– actual number of parties/coalitions	4	8	6	5	4
Slovakia, based on mandates	1990: 5.0	1992: 3.2	1994: 4.4	1998: 4.8	2002: 6.1
– based on votes	5.8	5.4	5.8	5.3	8.9
– actual number of parties/coalitions	7	5	7	6	7
Hungary, based on mandates	1990: 3.8	1994: 2.9	1998: 3.4	2002: 2.2	
– based on votes	6.7	5.5	4.5	2.8	
– actual number of parties/coalitions*	7	7	6	3	

* Independents excluded. *Source*: Own compilations based on Laakso and Taagepera's index of effective parties (1 divided by the sum of S^2, where S is the percentage of seats or votes). West European average is calculated from Lane and Ersson (1996: 131).

NICK SITTER is Associate Professor of European Political Economy at the Norwegian School of Management. He wrote his PhD thesis at the London School of Economics on East Central European Party Systems and has published on party competition and Euroscepticism in post-communist and Western Europe. He previously held an Assistant Professorship at the Central European University in Budapest.

ELISABETH BAKKE is Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science, University of Oslo. She wrote her PhD thesis on nationalism in the First Czechoslovak Republic, and has edited and co-authored a recent book on the political development of Central Europe (*Sentral-Europa og Baltikum etter 1989*, Det Norske Samlaget, Oslo, 2002).
ADDRESS: Department of Political Science, University of Oslo, P.O. Box 1097 Blindern, NO-0317 Oslo, Norway. [email: elisabeth.bakke@stv.uio.no]

Paper submitted 21 November 2003; accepted for publication 24 March 2004.