

Political Transformation in East-Central Europe: Are There General Patterns of Development from Communism to EU Membership?

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Introduction

The sudden and to a great extent unexpected breakdown of Communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s attracted the attention of social scientists from a wide range of disciplines. This attention was quite natural. The collapse of Communist rule did not only represent a fascinating series of events that affected people's lives on both sides of the former Iron Curtain. It was also a kind of unique 'social experiment' that gave researchers an extraordinary opportunity to generate and test many ideas and theories. Some of the most thought-provoking questions, which were raised just after the breakdown of Communist regimes, were concerned with the possible future of the transforming countries. Are they pre-determined to follow the same path of development or should we expect their developments to diverge? Is the transformation process country specific or more or less universal? Which factors tend to promote similarities and which factors tend to create differences among various post-Communist countries?

The Communist regimes in the former Soviet bloc were to a great extent directed by orders from Moscow, and thus were very similar in terms of the basic structure of their institutions, laws, economies and politics. On the other hand, there were many differences among countries subjected to Communist rule. Different countries had very diverse pre-Communist historical developments: they varied substantially in culture, political traditions and

their overall level of economic and social development. Furthermore, their geographical location, and thus geopolitical position, differed significantly. Once the unifying yoke of Kremlin apparatchiks was removed from the former satellite states of the Soviet Union, space opened up for individual countries within the post-Communist world to follow diverse developmental trajectories. Soon, however, new factors appeared that tended to promote similarities, rather than differences, in their post-Communist development. Some of these factors were highly universal (e.g. globalization). Other factors seemed to be quite universal at the beginning of the 1990s (e.g. the universal adoption of liberal democracy and Western-style market economies) but conditions at the end of the 1990s taught us the lesson that more economic and political outcomes of the transformation process are possible. Finally, factors connected with the Europeanization of post-Communist countries and the EU enlargement process had quite an ambiguous effect in terms of the similarity of the transformation outcomes. On the one hand, this was a unifying force of enormous power, but only for the most developed post-Communist countries in Central Europe and the Baltic. These countries, which appeared most prepared for EU accession and consequently were included in the first wave of EU enlargement in 2004, had to harmonize many policies and develop similar institutions in order to comply with EU standards and rules. On the other hand, EU enlargement policy, which distinguished three groups of countries – countries that were invited to join the EU, countries that were given the chance to seek EU membership in the foreseeable future, and countries that were never seriously considered for membership – supported the process of economic and political differentiation among the respective groups.

Anyone who attempts to search for a general pattern of post-Communist development is confronted with at least two serious problems. The first consists in the fact that economic, social, demographic, and political development may not necessarily be congruent. This makes any attempt to find a ‘general pattern of development’ very complicated. To avoid this problem (while leaving it unresolved), we have decided to concentrate only on

political development. The second complication consists in the fact that countries under Communist rule had been very different before the Communists came to power. Three macro-regions can be distinguished that differ substantially in terms of their historical development, religions, culture, and economic development: East-Central Europe, South-Eastern Europe, and Eastern Europe 'proper'.¹ The following text focuses only on the countries of East-Central Europe, which we define for this purpose as the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary. Although Slovenia is in many cases also considered to be part of East-Central Europe, it was not included in the observed group due to its specific development connected with the breakdown of Yugoslavia. The restriction of compared countries to only those from East-Central Europe, which are, despite their differences, historically, economically and culturally rather close to each other, especially when compared with some other post-Communist countries (Berglund, Hellén and Aarebrot, 1998; Mansfeldová, 2003), has advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, it makes generalizations more plausible and meaningful. On the other, readers should not forget that the identification of general features of their political development can only be attributed to the four studied countries and may not necessarily be applicable to other post-Communist states.

Despite the complexity of the transformation process, which often seems to be seen by Western observers as complete chaos, we believe that several general trends in the political development in East-Central Europe can be identified. These are the increasing role of political parties in politics, the growing rationality of interest-based voting behaviour, more clearly structured political ties (the growing importance of the relationship between the social structures and political parties), and, finally, the increasing influence of the EU on their political development by helping shape their political institutions. These general trends were not observ-

1 It is clear, however, that any such classification is to some extent arbitrary, as many indicators can be used to classify countries and it is impossible to objectively decide which should be used in practice. Similarly, it is difficult to decide which of the mentioned groups an individual country belongs to.

able at the same time. While the first three general features were more or less observable in the regions from the mid-nineties, the ‘Europeanization’ of politics in the regions quickly took off only in the first years of the new millennium with the gradual completion of the EU accession process.

1. Towards Party Politics

Although political parties are usually considered to be key institutions necessary for the long-term development of successful democratic regimes (Pridham, 1995), they were not particularly popular in post-Communist countries in the early 1990s. This is not surprising given the kind of parties citizens of the observed countries had experience with. From the three functions political parties usually have in society – recruitment and training of future leaders, legitimizing government through the electoral contest of multiple political parties, and the translation of social conflict into political contestation – Communist parties hardly fulfilled more than the first. But even their recruitment and training of future leaders had a somewhat perverse form: the image of the ‘political party’ was also poor since the ‘personnel policies’ of Communist parties in power tended to resemble organizations involved in organized crime than institutions that came into existence to serve society. Very often, the most unscrupulous and loyal, but at the same time professionally and managerially quite incompetent, members of the party were promoted within the party hierarchy the quickest. The fact that the breakdown of the Communist regimes provided an opportunity for the real political competition of different parties did not improve the popular image of political parties very much. Soon, the general public adopted the view that political parties were just machines serving those seeking power and did not see much difference in whether there was one such machine or many. The rationale for such general distrust of political parties was party based on observations of reality. While the most prominent leaders of Communist parties were stripped of power, many ‘second and third tier politicians’, former members of the totalitarian Party, soon appeared in public life as active members of various parties, in-

cluding those on the Right. But the unpopularity of political parties may not necessarily be a significant measure of their utility in political practice.

The viability of political parties in post-Communist East-Central Europe in the early nineties was, however, threatened more seriously than just by their mere lack of popularity. The philosophy of 'non-political politics' became quite popular in the early 1990s, which was promoted by many former prominent dissidents who later became influential as post-Communist politicians (e.g. Václav Havel) or public opinion-makers (like Adam Michnik). Supporters of 'non-political politics' tended to downplay the importance of political parties in society, claiming that parties were an outdated type of organization alienated from society and no longer served its needs. In contrast, they stressed the role of NGOs, civic associations, political movements, and civic initiatives in public life. As a consequence, political parties had to compete with many non-partisan political organizations in the first free post-Communist elections. An indicative sign of party unpopularity was the fact that many political organizations that ran for office carefully avoided the word 'party' in their names. Among those that exceeded the five per cent legal thresholds, there were three 'Movements,' two 'Alliances,' 'Forums' and 'Unions' and one 'Action,' 'Federation,' 'Confederation,' 'Agreement,' 'Congress,' 'Trade Union' and even one 'Public' (Kostelecký, 2002). Most of these organizations were not parties in terms of their organizational structure and membership. Only the Communist and post-Communist parties, some former satellite parties and the parties claiming to be successors of historical parties, were 'political parties' in the truest sense (the Social Democrats, Christian Democrats, Slovak National Party). The poor image of political parties worked strongly against them in early post-Communist electoral contests. The winners of the first post-Communist elections in respective countries (Civic Forum in the Czech Republic, the Public Against Violence in Slovakia, Solidarity in Poland, and the Hungarian Democratic Forum in Hungary) were not classical parties either in name or organizational structure. They were rather loosely organized umbrella movements without clearly defined membership and

organizational structures. As far as their political programme was concerned, they were rather vaguely defined anti-Communist movements that included representatives of many different political platforms and ideologies.²

Soon after their victorious elections, the fragile unity of these broad anti-Communist umbrella movements started to unravel. There were many possible transformation strategies that could be translated into practical policies, each of which is based on different assumptions, political philosophies and beliefs. Naturally, these clashes over the direction of reforms led to the formation of more ideologically and politically distinct groups and factions, and, finally, to the split of broad movements into several different political organizations. The core cleavages leading to these splits were usually economic, represented above all by the differences between economic neo-liberals who promoted the ‘shock therapy’ model of transformation and social-democracy oriented politicians who promoted a gradualist model of economic reform. Differences in politicians’ attitudes towards the organizational form of political groups, and the role of more hierarchically and formally organized political parties in society, was also an important dividing line in that context.

Thus 1990 to 1993 represents a period in which disputes over the role of political parties between the respective supporters of political parties and ‘non-political politics’ became a cornerstone of political discourse in the observed countries. The outcomes of the second post-Communist elections decided not only what kind of economic reforms governments should implement, but also which type of political organization would gain greater popular support. The outcomes of these elections are easy to interpret in this respect. Political parties clearly outperformed other kinds of organizations. There are several reasons for this. The early period of post-Communist transformation was particularly difficult for many people. The economic and political situation was quite un-

2 The partial exception was the Hungarian Democratic Forum, which had a clearer ideological profile due to the fact that it represented only the conservative part of the former dissident movement, whereas liberals were represented by other movements that ran separately in elections.

stable, and the knowledge many people had of the 'old rules of the game' was no longer usable.

In such uncertain situations many people turned to politicians with strong leadership skills. Politicians with such 'strong personalities' tended naturally to build more hierarchically structured organizations with clearly defined structures and membership to be able to control and to manage them. A typical party of this type was usually built 'from above' by leaders of the different factions of former political movements who used their governmental and parliamentary posts to attract media attention and, consequently, to build a political image.

Besides Communist parties themselves and a few former satellite parties, hardly any of the newly reestablished political parties had any significant membership base and grassroots activities. Successful party leaders, however, proved capable of attracting many new members interested in participating in politics and building political careers at the local level, who were then able to develop organizations visible to the public. Many citizens not familiar with 'long and boring' democratic discussions over policies started to see loosely organized political movements, which usually had a collective rather than a strong personality form of leadership, as incapable of dealing with the very real and urgent problems connected with the transformation process. Parties were soon seen as more effective than movements since they were able to secure party discipline in parliamentary voting and, therefore, their political behaviour seemed to be more predictable in the eyes of voters.

Having dominated parliaments, political parties were prepared to use their political, economic and legislative power to secure accomplished positions. It was quite easy for political parties to mobilize members and supporters by providing access to economic resources and sources of power on the local and regional level. The privatization of a huge amount of state property under party control proved to be an exceptionally effective tool for parties in that respect. In a situation of 'post-revolutionary chaos' and the absence of Civil Service Codes, public administrations were very vulnerable to pressures from politicians. Despite the remarkable number

of privatization scandals and other financial scandals connected with political parties and their individual representatives that were discovered by the press in the 1990s, public discontent with party performance did not lead dissatisfied voters to prefer other kinds of organizations over political parties at the polls.

Later, however, parties understood that their position could also be more firmly maintained by legislative tactics that were exclusively in the hands of the most powerful parties. Through electoral reform, rules over party financing, and their control over the public media, parties actively sought to disfavour other types of organizations as well as independent candidates in electoral contests and to prevent civic associations and NGOs from effectively participating in decision-making procedures. As a consequence, only ten years after the collapse of Communism, political parties are both very powerful and very unpopular at the same time. Some authors (e.g. Ágh, 1998) label such parties ‘cartel parties’ since they are characterized as institutions organized largely top-down, held together by the mutual economic and power interests of their membership, and rather hostile to newcomers. However solid and uncontested the position of current political parties may appear at the moment, these organizations, which almost completely ‘privatized’ state institutions and public spaces and are deeply distrusted by the public, may face serious challenges from other types of organizations in the near future. The percentage of citizens who do not participate in elections is already very high and increasing, and represents a major potential force that can be mobilized for change.

2. Towards Rational Interest-Based Politics

Although the concept of rationality is commonplace in both public discussions and scholarly literature, there is little consensus as to how the term itself should be defined. To avoid misunderstanding, it should be mentioned how the concept of rationality is understood and used in our context. Of the many definitions of rationality, we have chosen those of Rosser (1993) who describe rationally acting people as those who ‘know what they want, ...

what they want is internally consistent, ... they act to get what they want to the best of their ability on the basis of the information available to them'. At a higher level of generalization, rationality was characterized by Kizima (1985: 70) in terms of the following:

Becoming aware of the objective problem situation and formulating the problem requiring solution; defining the field of possible or desired solutions and making decisions about the proper program for problem solving; implementing the program, and controlling and correcting its course; analyzing and evaluating results.

It is also important to stress that rationality or non-rationality is more a feature of a particular action than a quality of actors. Also, it seems to be common wisdom that rationality is not independent of the particular situation of the actor. Consequently, not every human action is (or can be) rational, but there are some that are (and can be). Conditions under which actors make decisions represent in any case an important factor. Some conditions are more favourable to rationality than others. Under some conditions the rationality of actors is highly probable, under other conditions rational behaviour is hardly possible, and under certain conditions rational action is not possible at all. How does the post-1989 situation in East-Central Europe look like from this point of view?

In terms of the basic dispositions of voters to vote rationally, there does not seem to be any substantial difference between voters in East-Central Europe and standard Western democracies. Many conditions necessary or supportive of rationality were fulfilled in East-Central Europe. An international public opinion survey conducted in 1991 (McIntosh and Mac Iver, 1993) clearly showed that most voters in East-Central Europe had known what they wanted: democracy and a better economy. The list of wanted items included the elimination of censorship, a free media, multi-party elections, an independent judicature, the freedom to establish new political parties and civic organizations, and the ability to travel freely. The situation was somewhat more complex in terms of economic matters. It should not be surprising that besides the ubiquitous desire for greater prosperity (nowadays, some commentators suggest that the popular revolutionary slogan 'Back to Europe' should have

been interpreted from the very beginning as ‘We want German cars, French fashion, British cigars, Scandinavian housing quality and Swiss incomes’), there were many fundamentally different views on how to transform poorly functioning economies into more productive ones. But the plurality of ideas on what to do with the economy is not uncommon, and not knowing how to reach desired outcomes does not necessarily mean that people do not know what they want.

However, some specific features of the situation in the post-Communist countries of East-Central Europe make voter rationality less probable. Specific features include voters’ limited experience with democratic procedures and the extremely complicated task of simultaneous political and economic reforms that their countries had to face. The by-product of these two features is the relatively low internal consistency of voters’ political attitudes, which itself represents another factor that makes rational voting more complicated. The other conditions not supportive of voter rationality at the early stages of the post-Communist transformations included the high number of political parties and movements that participated in electoral contests and the inability of voters to locate their own position in the social structure. These conditions unsupportive of rationality, however, gradually changed during the course of the 1990s. Generally, there was a clear shift to conditions more supportive of voter rationality, including voters’ growing understanding of democratic procedures as a result of their repeated electoral experiences, voters’ growing awareness of their own position in the social structure, their more consistent political attitudes, the decreased number of political parties, the decreased number of electoral issues, and the gradual replacement of ‘transformation problems’ (‘how to privatize?’) by simpler ones (‘should teachers be better paid?’, ‘should the value-added tax be decreased?’).

Gradually changing conditions from those discouraging rationality to those more conducive to it were reflected in the growing role of rationality in voter decisions. In the early 1990s, elections were often about symbolic, non-calculable issues (national, religious, historical meaning, etc). Beliefs, traditions, myths,

and impressions were often cited as the key factors influencing voters' electoral choices (Körösenyi, 1991; Raciborski, 1993; Kostelecký, 1994; Szomolányi and Mesežnikov, 1994; Glatz, 1995; Marody, 1995). Even electoral choices on the direction of economic reforms were based exclusively on their confidence in different economic reformers. Such confidence was to a large extent endogenous and did not reflect a rational evaluation of alternative approaches to economic transformation. Changing conditions tended to affect the character of electoral behaviour. In the late 1990s, elections were much more about rationally calculated group interests than they were ten years previously. It should also be mentioned, however, that there is no reason to fall victim to historical optimism, which would expect an 'automatic improvement' in the situation of post-Communist countries towards more responsible and transparent political parties serving the interests of rationally calculating voters. The political future is open even in the 'most advanced' post-Communist countries. The increasing importance of the mass media, namely TV, as the main forum for the public presentation of politicians, may well lead to the revival of a 'politics of symbols'. It is much more difficult for politicians to present political programmes that can be rationally evaluated during short sound bites than to repeatedly present simple symbols or a few key words with which they can later be associated. The increased use of sophisticated campaign strategies based on psychologists' recommendations and marketing and business ad agencies have also led political parties to focus more intensively on symbols, feelings, expectations, and desires of voters. Finally, the process of EU enlargement has also increased the frequency with which nationalistic symbols and themes are used in all accession countries.

3. Towards More Clearly Structured Politics

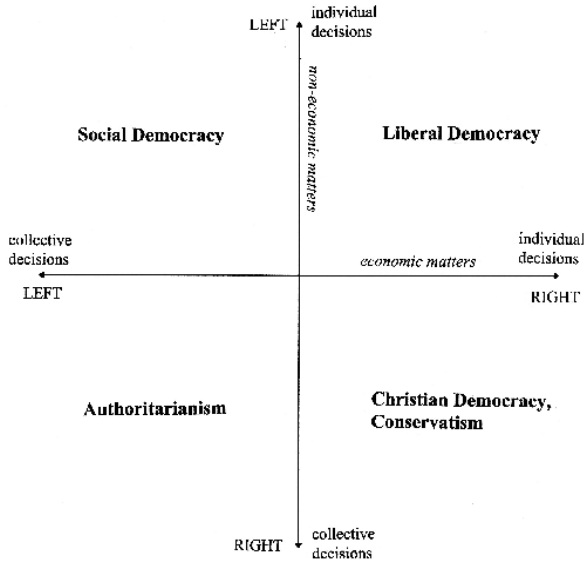
The first years after the breakdown of Communist regimes proved to be a period of great political turbulence and unpredictability. Dozens of new political parties emerged, most of which soon underwent processes of internal fragmentation or merged

with other parties. Some parties avoided splits and mergers but underwent dramatic changes in leadership and, consequently, political orientation. Dozens of parties changed names, many of them several times. Although the political development of post-Communist parties seemed to be rather chaotic in the eyes of many Western observers, namely those coming from Anglo-Saxon countries with stable bipartisan systems, we believe that a trend toward more clearly structured politics in East-Central European countries can be identified. The first sign of the emerging ‘political order’ can be seen in the gradual decrease of political parties able to gain seats in elected assemblies, and, therefore, real political influence.

The decreased number of political parties also helped decrease the number of major political cleavages around which political contests evolved. Empirical research focused on identifying the basic structures of ‘political space’ (e.g. Wiatr, 1993; Jasiewicz, 1993, 1997; Raciborski, 1993; Zukowski, 1993; Gebethner, 1993; Bigler, 1996; Lomax, 1995; Tóka, 1995; Brokl, 1994; Kostecký, 1995) came to the conclusion that there were two cleavages dividing political space into four basic segments. These two cleavages were grouped as economic and non-economic. The economic cleavage usually divided those who believed in free market principles and those who supported greater state regulation of the economy. The non-economic cleavages were of different types (e.g. secularism – religiosity, nationalism – cosmopolitanism, authoritarianism – democracy, traditionalism – libertarianism, etc), but all had something in common. All these types are various expressions of the basic difference between those who believe individuals should have the right to uphold their own values and follow their own norms and those who oppose this, believing that values and norms should be collective. Because collective identities, values and norms are multiple, the non-economic cleavages along which political space is structured can also be numerous. It was also demonstrated by empirical research that these two axes were to a great extent independent of each other, dividing political space into four basic segments: Social Democratic, Liberal Democratic, Christian Democratic/Conservative, and Authoritarian (see Figure 1).

After the breakdown of Communist rule, only several years were necessary to reduce dozens of ideological cleavages into those mentioned above. Despite the fact that the division of ideological space was relatively structured quite quickly, resembling the main political and ideological divisions in Western Europe, important differences between them should be emphasized. In Western Europe, this ideological space was firmly linked with existing social structures and closely reflected the political party system (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967); in the post-Communist countries of East-Central Europe, relationships between structural divisions in society, ideological divisions in society, and respective party systems were much less clear. In fact, their situation changed over time in relation to the course of economic and social transformations. We believe that three different stages can be identified in this respect.

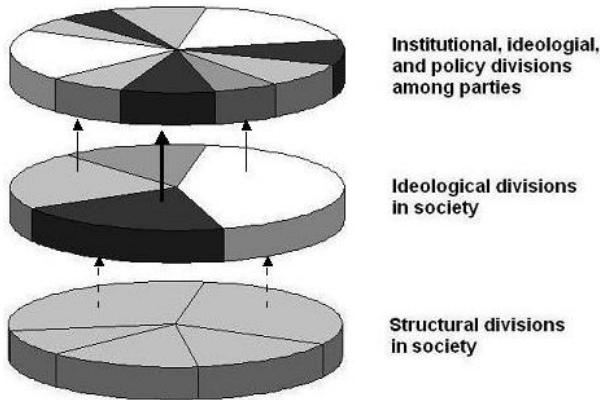
Figure 1. Two basic cleavages and four basic segments of ‘political space’ in post-Communist East-Central Europe



Note: from Kostecký, 2002

The situation at the beginning of the 1990s is schematically described in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Relations among structural divisions, ideological divisions in society, and divisions among parties at the beginning of the 1990s in East-Central Europe

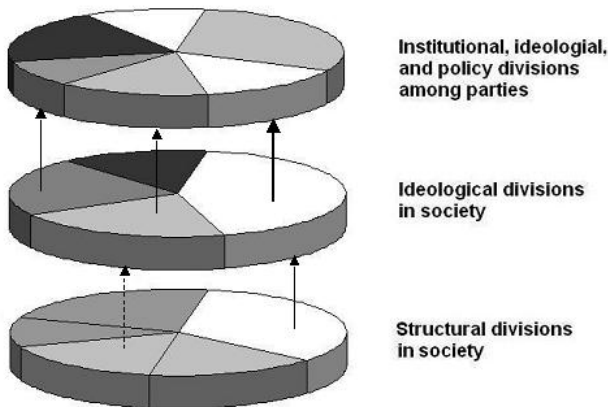


In the beginning of the 1990s structural divisions in post-Communist societies were not very clearly developed. The egalitarian policies promoted by Communist governments were partly successful in this respect. Many social divisions typical in societies with market economies (e.g. class cleavage as a conflict between labour and capital) did not exist at all. Many other cleavages (such as regional, religious, or ethnic) were partially pushed out of public space and were neither much perceived nor articulated. Wessels and Klingemann (1994) used the term ‘flattened societies’ to describe the early post-Communist situation in which unclear and quickly changing social structures prevented citizens from defining their political interests. Despite this, relatively clear ideological divisions in these societies developed rapidly. These ideological divisions were mostly based on traditions and beliefs and were not deeply connected with either social structures or emerging party systems. Party systems consisted of many parties and political movements. Some of the existing parties

were very closely connected with particular political ideologies, whereas others changed their political orientation rather freely. Several different parties or movements usually claimed to represent the same political ideology, while other parties or movements distanced themselves from any political ideology all together.

As the transformation process proceeded, the situation of the political scene became more clearly defined (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Relations among structural divisions, ideological divisions in the society, and divisions among parties in the mid 1990s in East-Central Europe

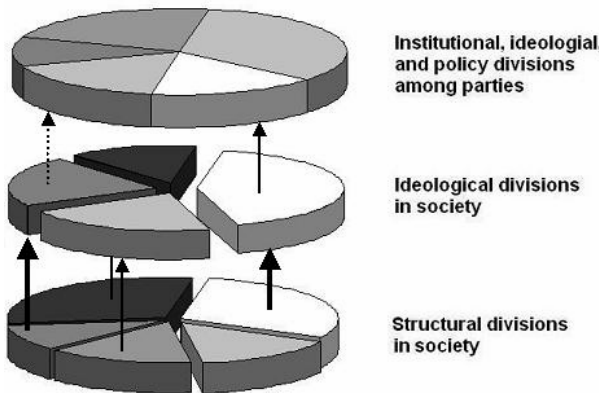


Structural divisions in society gradually became more delineated. Privatization and economic transformation soon led to growing economic inequalities. People started to learn the pros and cons of the market economy. Some people profited from the transformation, others became its ‘losers’. Non-economic cleavages also became more visible, as the freedom of the press gave many issues that were suppressed under Communism the opportunity to be voiced publicly, thereby articulating the demands and ideological positions of different social groups. Freedom of association enabled group differences to be institutionalized. Ideological divisions in society were the least changeable part of the political space. It was reported that the political attitudes and val-

ues ‘behind’ ideological divisions in society were surprisingly stable (Matějů and Řeháková, 1997; Šimoník, 1996; Zukowski, 1993; Bútorová et al, 1996). Scholars also observed that the bonds between the position of the individual in the social structure and his/her ideological positions steadily strengthened, although the relationship between the social structure and the ideological division of society remained quite weak in comparison with Western standards. Party systems consisting of a relatively small number of relevant parties stabilized. Remaining parties occupied some of the main segments of the ideological space and concentrated on political battles with their ideological opponents rather than challenging other similar parties that sought to occupy the same political niche. At this point, everything seemed to lead towards the development of a classical ‘frozen party system’ in which structural divisions, ideological divisions, and party systems are linked to each other, mutually reinforcing existing political divisions.

However, the political development of the observed countries at the beginning of the 21st century did not follow this expected path (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Relations among structural divisions, ideological divisions in society, and divisions among parties at beginning of the 21st century in East-Central Europe



Structural divisions in the societies continued to be more accentuated, visible and clearly perceived. Also, ideological divisions tended to be more identifiable than at any other time during the post-Communist transformation. Although links between structural divisions and ideological divisions in these societies were apparently strengthened, which theoretically could serve as a social base ‘anchoring’ newly emerging parties, this expectation did not materialize. Parliamentary elections in Poland in 2001, as well as in Slovakia in 1998 and 2002, witnessed remarkable changes in their party systems. Quite surprisingly, brand new parties entered parliament, and, even more surprisingly, several formerly strong and relatively well-established parties suddenly fell from the political spotlight. Although the situation in the Czech Republic and Hungary seems more stable in this respect, one should not forget the growing dissatisfaction of the general public with current political representatives and their very low voter turnout, which threaten the current party systems in these countries with future instability. The last point to be mentioned here is the fact that political parties tend to be somewhat less ideologically differentiated and more pragmatic than before. In all observed countries, citizens experienced several changes in the composition of government over the last fourteen years. Citizens that rely on party programmes should have expected radical changes in government policy, but nothing like that happened in practice. Under the tight constraints of meeting EU accession criteria and increasing economic pressures, ideological differences between parties in government have been weakened to some extent. To summarize this section, one could say that in East-Central European countries the main ideological cleavages and electoral issues may have frozen, but party systems have not.

4. Increasing Influence of the European Union on Political Development

The European Union had only a moderate influence on the political development of the observed countries after the breakdown of the Communist regimes in the early 1990s. While it is true

that the transformation process was conducted under slogans like 'Back to Europe', 'Europe' did not necessarily represent the European Union. Rather, individual European countries and the US influenced early post-Communist development more than the EU itself. Moreover, Western governments and advisors generally influenced economic development more than political processes. The economic dimension of the transformation was clearly considered key, and thus attracted the most attention and assistance. The political transformation was regarded as something in which foreigners should not interfere in order to avoid accusations of 'patronage' or 'neo-colonial' politics. Beside the general need to comply with basic democratic norms imposed on newly democratizing states by institutions like the Council of Europe, there were hardly any 'guidelines' on how political reforms should proceed.

The decision of the EU to enlarge changed the situation dramatically in this respect. The general development 'towards Europe' materialized with the initiation of pre-accession negotiations between the EU and candidate countries. In seeking inclusion in the first wave of enlargement, candidate countries faced two types of pressure from the EU. The first was direct legal pressures that demanded compliance with the European common law (*acquis communautaire*). The second was indirect financial pressure from the EU, which was asserted through the general requirements that have to be met in order to receive EU funds. Although neither legal nor financial pressure was focused directly on influencing internal politics in the respective countries, the consequence of these accession procedures for local political developments in candidate states was profound. The harmonization process led in many cases to the transformation of existing institutions in accession countries and to the creation of quite new institutions.

In the political arena, the EU's most significant role was in its influence on administrative reforms and their consequences. The closer East-Central European countries were to actual EU accession, the more necessary it became to reform the system of public administration in line with European standards. The creation of elected representative assemblies on the regional level was the first

step forward. Consequently, elected regional representatives appeared on the political scene.

Regional governments, though very young institutions, began to seek foreign partnerships for direct collaboration on the regional level. Regional politicians and officials who were involved in Euroregion activities had a chance to learn many skills that would be useful in future. The birth of regional level self-government led to the diffusion of such international partnerships from only boundary regions to the whole country. Regions usually hold closer relationships with several similar regions from EU countries. At the start, the character of cooperation was mainly symbolic and involved the coordination of political actions and the transfer of know-how. As time progressed and the observed countries began to approach EU membership, more direct collaboration in the form of joint projects evolved. Regional representatives also gained access to the direct and independent flow of timely information about EU policies due to their relationship with the Committee of the Regions. This gave regional representatives greater independence from national politicians, and together with the gradual devolution of authority and responsibilities towards regions, gave the regions more power. Consequently, newly constituted regions become increasingly important actors in domestic politics.

The 'regionalization' of national politics has also tended to strengthen the regional branches of political parties, which could probably prevent centralization in the future. The EU-inspired administrative reforms resulted in the emergence of regional governments. Inter alia, the existence of regional governments simply means more governments and more governments mean more possible coalitions among different political parties. This can have a significant moderating effect on the policies of key national political parties and leads to greater political pragmatism. The potential necessity to make coalitions with a wide range of political parties tends to soften ideological antagonisms among parties on the national level as well.

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