



Substance and Process in the Development of Party Systems in East Central Europe

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What conditions in post-communism affect the rise of competitive political parties capable of providing significant options to the electorate? The initial wisdom held that numerous weaknesses of political society in East Central Europe impeded the consolidation of a stable party system. More recently, two distinct schools emerged to present a more structured view of political space. One relies on a substantive evaluation of political cleavages, ideological posturing, and issue relevance to map party positions and voter placements in post-communist politics. This approach concentrates on emerging social and economic cleavages as the foundation of party systems. The second approach focuses on a process perspective that looks to political mechanisms such as elections and coalition formation that act as a funnel for the formation of new party systems. This article combines the substantive and process understandings of political choice to provide a comprehensive analysis of the transformation of party systems in post-communist states. The concentration is both on the demand side of the electoral process, i.e. the formation of cleavages among the electorate, and on the supply side, i.e. the channeling of political options through institutional mechanisms. Together, the process of party evolution and the substance of party differentiation help to define the hegemonic, polarized, fragmented, and pluralist phases in the consolidation of party systems in post-communism. © 1997 The Regents of the University of California

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Democratic stability is predicated on effective political choice. The emergence of political parties capable of facilitating such choice is an essential element for the consolidation of democracy in former communist regimes. The formation of political parties and their structuring into mature party systems is an institutional development required of all modern democracies. Political parties allow for the representation and expression of different interests in society, for the provision of alternative policy options, for the mediation of conflicts, and for the implementation of accountable government.

The essential question, then, is what conditions in post-communism affect the rise of competitive parties capable of providing significant options to the electorate. The received wisdom from the study of Western systems is that democratic stability is a function of well-defined social cleavages represented by political options through clear issue and programmatic

definition, calling for strong identification between groups in the electorate and political parties (Evans and Whitefield, 1993). The problem, of course, is that in the post-communist world, the linkage between citizenry and decision-makers is weak due to the absence of strong intermediary institutions of all types, including parties in political society.

The Weakness of Political Society

A variety of explanations has been offered for the difficulties in consolidating party systems in the former communist states. We can best conceptualize this condition in terms of a political market place (Mair, 1991), where the competitiveness of parties is both a demand and supply function. On the demand side, electorates need to be well cognizant of collective interests and identities so as to translate them into political choices. On the supply side, political actors need to be well-placed along defined axes of competition, so as to provide alternative options to the electorate. The difficulty in East Central Europe (ECE) is that the electoral market is wide open on both sides. There is ample evidence that there were too many "suppliers," i.e. political parties chasing a share of the market, at a time when the consumers of politics, the electorates, were largely uncertain of their various needs and interests (Bozoki, 1990; Friszke, 1990; Kostova, 1992). As a result, the electoral market of post-communism has been too open and overextended, rendering the linkage between political parties and potential constituencies weak and ineffective.

Several reasons have been advanced in support of this position. A basic one is the high degree of uncertainty associated with the economic, social, and political transition from communism towards the market and democracy (Bunce and Csanadi, 1993). Many individuals and groups in society have difficulty in understanding the change, and in evaluating their socio-economic positions in the emerging system. Interests in the transition are indeterminate, and serve poorly as the basis of collective identity and social position. Outcomes of economic and political change are highly contingent, making even more difficult the individual evaluations of political programs and individual association with parties. The absence of a well-defined socio-economic base, in short, results in a failure to produce the cleavages necessary to form strong group identities as vehicles for party politics.

A similar argument looks to the scope of the post-communist transition. The systemic reconstruction taking place in the ECE produces an overload of functions in the political, social, economic, and cultural spheres. Questions of national identity, social position, cultural expression, economic practice, and political legacy are part of the transition (Offe, 1991). The consequence is a functional overload where many issues must be addressed simultaneously, producing a chaotic environment with too many tasks, too many choices. Transformation becomes a systemic property itself, defining the political life of the countries in question. In such a context, it is difficult to form structured identities and interests and to turn to collective action as a political demand. Moreover, since there are so many issues to be resolved, there is increased opportunity for suppliers of solutions, culminating in numerous entrants into the political fray. Many of these new actors lack defined positions and instead seek locations in political spaces with a presumed high pay-off. As a result, there is too much crowding in particular spaces, further adding to the confusion within society about party identities.

The focus of the third argument relates directly to the linkage between voters and parties. The primary point here is that an organizational impediment exists in the post-communist world that makes it difficult to form strong institutions accepted by the people. This situation is in large part the social and political legacy of state socialism. The long-term hegemony of the communist

party over many aspects of societal life prevented the development of an intermediary metastructure, leaving instead a significant empty space between the household and the state (Rychard, 1993). The task in the post-communist period is to create and integrate meso-institutions into political life by establishing intermediary groups that facilitate links between the citizenry and political parties.

A variant of the argument concentrates on the “antipolitics” culture fostered by the opposition during its struggle with the communist regimes. A deliberate strategy to create a public sphere outside the communist state structure, the antipolitics concept emphasized the formation of a civil society through democratic discourse, voluntary associations, and grass roots participation (Ost, 1990; Kiss, 1992). But such a vision of democracy downplayed the significance of the “high” institutions, parties, parliaments, or government coalition, in building a democratic political society. To this was added a strong suspicion, in the public mind, of political parties as instruments of communist rule. “Party” had a bad connotation, so that many of the new organizations during the founding moment of democratic politics in ECE preferred alternative labels, such as movements, forums, confederations, or unions. The absence of viable intermediary institutions and the antipolitics stance carried over into the transition period to devalue the role of political parties in shaping competitive politics.

A final reason for the volatility of the party systems lies specifically on the supply side, in the proliferation of political entrepreneurs who form political parties. This situation is due to the extensive political opportunity structure (Tarrow, 1994) brought about by the collapse of the communist regime. The removal of the prohibition on alternative political activity is sufficient to provide incentives for numerous contenders to seek power, so that alongside serious political forces there are many politicians who attempt to fulfill personal ambitions and advance pet causes. Since the electoral market is unrestrained by past identities and rules of entry are relatively lax, many of these aspiring politicians make their claims through the new parties. While most of those mini-parties remain insignificant, they cloud political choices and, for a while at least, impede the consolidation of an effective party system.

The nature of the post-communist transition (too uncertain, overloaded with too many tasks, open to too many ambitions, and beset by weak institutions) bears directly on the assessment of party system formation in ECE. In contrast to the evolutionary pattern in Western Europe, where the rise of sequential cleavages served as a mechanism for the formation of parties along well-defined competitive issues (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967), the overarching nature of the “1989 Revolution” produced a distinctive pattern of party development that has been labeled as *sui generis* (see Whitefield and Evans, 1994, p. 8) or *tabula rasa* (see Kitschelt, 1994, p. 1). Such a party structure is closer to the experience of Latin America, where there is little connection to the past and where party systems arise *de novo* after periods of authoritarian rule or revolutionary activity (Dix, 1989). The *tabula rasa* hypothesis accentuates the lack of historic cleavage dimensions, the chaotic social and economic environment, and the unrestrained opportunities for popular mobilization by new political entrepreneurs. The argument is that the numerous weaknesses of political society impede the formation and consolidation of a structured party system capable of providing informed choices to the electorate.

Structuring Political Choice

The *tabula rasa* account of party systems in ECE has been challenged by analyses that present a more structured view of the political space in the former communist states. Two distinctive trends are evident in this challenge.

One trend relies primarily on a substantive evaluation of political cleavages, ideological posturing, and issue relevance to delineate party positions and voter placements in post-communist politics. The initial view was based on deductive reasoning that saw the primary fault line as being between promarket, liberal versus state interventionist, authoritarian forces (Kitschelt, 1992), or saw a multilevel political spacing taking in economic, national/ethnic, and state security calculations (Evans and Whitehead, 1993). Since then, much of the substantive placement of political parties and voters along the political spectrum has relied on opinion surveys of the mass public (Toka, 1995; Markowski, 1995) and, to a lesser extent, of the political elite (Kitschelt, 1994; Crowther, 1995).

The second approach focuses on a process perspective to give shape to party systems in ECE. More tolerant of the original *tabula rasa* argument than the substantive school, the process view concentrates on developments that help to transcend the initial conditions of the post-communist transition and give way to a more structured pattern of political interaction. Making virtue out of necessity, the focus here is foremost on political processes such as elections and coalitions that configure the supply side of the electoral market, and less on economic and social transformations that form even, more pertinent cleavages on the demand side. More than anything, it is political action that shapes party systems. What begins as an open political arena in the founding period, evolves through a dialogue between party elites and potential constituencies and gives rise to political parties more representative of social divisions (Agh, 1994, p. 232; Lewis, 1994a, b).

The substantive and process approaches form two distinctive genres in current theorizing about the emergence of political parties and the consolidation of party systems in the post-communist states. After an overview of the two perspectives, it is argued that a more useful understanding of party systems in ECE can be attained by merging the two approaches, appreciating both the content of political cleavages and the dynamic evolution of these divisions into more structured, competitive party systems.

Theorizing Substantive Cleavages

The substantive definition of party structure in the newly emerging democracies of ECE relies on the Lipset and Rokkan characterization of social cleavages as the basis of party systems. In this view, the type, emergence, saliency, and sequence of social divisions are paramount factors in the formation of parties and their interactions with voters. To explain the foundation of Western political systems, Lipset and Rokkan concentrated on divisions created by the national and industrial revolutions, producing four main cleavages—center–periphery, religious–secular, urban–agrarian, and owner–worker (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). Such a sequence need not be repeated in the ECE context, although a configuration of cleavages is necessary to structure party systems (Kitschelt, 1994; Whitefield and Evans, 1994).

Indeed, the absence of past cues and party loyalty as determinants of voting behavior necessitate a novel determination of the issues that are most salient to the transition. To prove the claim that parties in ECE represent distinct cleavages reflected in party spacing and voter perceptions, numerous surveys have been undertaken (Zagorski, 1994; Butorova and Butora, 1995; Crowther, 1995; Miller *et al.*, 1995; Whitefield and Evans, 1995). The primary strand concentrates on the identification of the most relevant social cleavages among the electorate, as reported by respondents' self-placement on positional and ideological issues. Another, less frequent, approach is to concentrate on the political elite. While there are no uniform findings across the region, some general tendencies have been uncovered.

First, the *tabula rasa* claim that no discernible competitive axes exist in post-communism has

been challenged by evidence of cleavages taking on political meanings. Several cleavages are evident, with generally two issues in each country strongly salient for the politics of transition. Moreover, the substances of the cleavages is not the same throughout the region, but varies across the ECE democratizing states. In that sense, at least, the tabula rasa position of multiple divisions without discernible order may not be too amiss.

The search for social cleavages as political factors has turned to investigations of ideological spacing or issue positioning among voters and elites. The results reveal a more complex picture than either the tabula rasa or unidimensionality perception of transition politics. Instead, ideological spacing is present, but differs across the ECE countries both in content and saliency (Whitehead and Evans, 1994). At the same time, there is a temporal trend towards greater significance of the left–right dimension around pro- or anti-market attitudes, suggesting that over time the socio-economic transformation in ECE will structure the economic interests and political positions of the citizenry. This conclusion is reinforced by links between the assigned ideological placement of the parties and correct voter perceptions of the parties' ideologies (Whitehead and Evans, 1994, p. 8).

Support for identifiable positioning of political parties comes from surveys of political elites and electorates on policy issues (Kitschelt, 1994; Toka, 1995). Party programs on several issues are discernible to the elite and to the electorate, but are more evident at the elite level. Most significant among both sets of respondents is the perception of coherent party platforms distinctive from other party programs (Kitschelt, 1994, p. 23). The conclusion of these studies is that linkages based on common program perceptions are being established between party elites and potential constituencies, despite the absence of prior party identification or of strong intermediary associations tying the voter to political organizations.

The surveys of mass and elite publics suggest the growth of identifiable political positions in the ideological and policy space of post-communism, facilitated by the growing ascendancy of social cleavages during the transition. With time, the political space is becoming more structured and more understandable to the public at large. Even so, there are still relatively weak political identities among the electorate and party loyalty remains problematic, as seen in recent election and public opinion swings (Millard, 1994a; Racz and Kukorelli, 1995). The organizational links between constituents and parties are even weaker, for few parties are able to attract a large number of members and supporters. More significantly, the evidence on the structuring of political preferences leaves unanswered the question about the dynamics that lead to the emergence of more viable political systems.

Theorizing the Process of Party Consolidation

The basic concern of the process argument is not the delineation of party ideologies, voters' positioning on issues, or social cleavages at any point in time, but the developmental pattern that shapes the political life of the post-communist states. Rather than substantive issue areas, it is the dynamic properties of the transition that help define the formation of political parties and the consolidation of party systems.

The emergence of a workable, meaningful political environment is a prolonged, complex process beset by many challenges. The transformation of the economy, culture, and society requires a variety of tasks that must be prioritized and that evolves over time as changes are accepted or rejected by relevant audiences or the voting public. Moreover, choices are not only voluntary and rational, but are often ad hoc responses to crises in the economy and society or to political challenges from other actors. The process of party building is thus contingent, shaped by the numerous socio-economic demands and political requirements.

Despite the contingency built into the transition, structuring of party systems takes place through a series of political outcomes defined by tasks, choices, and responses. These outcomes help to shape distinct stages in the process of party consolidation, each with a different mix of societal, organizational, and policy characteristics (Agh, 1994). The path from communism towards democracy can best be broken down into overlapping phases associated with the collapse of communism, the emergence of a competitive political space, the ultrafragmentation of that space, and an ensuing consolidation into a more effective political contest.

In contrast to the substantive definitions of ECE politics as reflective of socio-economic cleavages, process theory continues to emphasize the vacuum around the societal dimension of political parties. The latter lack sufficient roots among specific groups or strata, have little historical appeal through party identification, and articulate social demands poorly (Agh, 1994, pp. 230–31). Two major consequences emerge.

First, party formation is driven from above by political entrepreneurship located primarily in election contests and in parliaments. Parties tend to be cadre configurations, not mass organizations. Despite progress to date, parties and party systems remain weak and unconsolidated (Lewis, 1994a, pp. 391–393). The strengthening of party systems in ECE requires the grounding of political parties in an organizational capacity that forges established links to mass memberships. Democratic stability is dependent on such institutionalization, and not merely on substantive alignments along social cleavages or policy preferences. For that reason, greater attention to organizational strength and institutional maturity is required in the characterization of party systems in ECE.

Second, in an apparent paradox political parties are seen as weak, but their impact on the structuring of transitional politics is described as dominant (Agh, 1994; Lewis, 1994a,b). The development of party structure is driven by election contests and outcomes, and by parliamentary gamesmanship in between elections (Olson, 1993a). Electoral and parliamentary activities serve as a filter for the management of political space, acting as a screening device that elevates some political contenders to prominent roles, marginalizes other party formations, and eliminates altogether most aspiring parties (Agh, 1994, pp. 229–230). Process theories thus rely on political mechanisms as sorting devices that reduce the parties to an effective number of contenders, signal the ideological spacing of party positions, and test the policy effectiveness of competing programs. The emphasis is on political filtering, rather than on the social and economic transformation of society, as the catalyst for the consolidation of party systems.

Integrating Substance and Process

The distinction between the substantive and process explanations of party structure reflects the different origins of the two schools. The substantive perspective looks more to the similarity between the newly emerging ECE party systems and the Western European experience. It makes use of standard social cleavages, left–right axis of competition, and political realignment to measure the positioning of parties and voters through opinion surveys (Evans and Whitehead, 1993; Kitschelt, 1994; Rose, 1995). The process view is more concerned with historical events rather than standard political science dimensions to formulate the patterns of competition in the post-communist world (Agh, 1993; Lewis, 1994a). It represents ECE politics as more undetermined, with multidimensional axes of competition relevant to the transition phase. The posturing of political actors and the results of political contests serve to select out the most relevant competitive dimensions, and relegate other axes of competition and the parties attached to them to the dustbin of history.

There is also an obvious difference in the temporal dimension of the two perspectives. The substantive approach defines political dimensions and party locations at a given point in time. To do so, it relies on survey instruments to arrive at party preferences among voters and elites along the dominant axes of political competition. This method is primarily interested in the positioning of parties and voters, and tends to overlook temporal changes in party structures, at times coming close to a freezing hypothesis. As such, the timing of the survey provides the shape for party systems in the newly democratizing states of Europe. In contrast, the process argument stresses the evolutionary nature of party structures. From open, chaotic circumstances to more defined programs by politicians, to the effects of electoral judgements by the public, to parliamentary maneuvering that shapes the political contest among parties, a political system matures.

Both approaches move beyond the perception of ECE as an unstable vortex of changes and chaotic choices. The first stresses the existence of political identities, economic interests, and ideological differences as substantive dimensions in the post-communist world. These are the normal stuff of politics, and define political systems everywhere, even in the nascent democracies of ECE. The second concentrates on systemic development as the stuff of politics, looking to a growing maturity among political actors and the public to enhance the availability of choices in the political marketplace. Both provide a valuable recourse to the condemnation of former communist states as unstable political systems lacking the mechanisms to consolidate democracy.

Indeed, it is the combination of the substantive and process understandings of political choice that is bound to generate the most fruitful analysis of party systems in the post-communist states. Half a decade after the collapse of communism, it is obvious that the transitions to democracy in ECE are not static, but evolve in a manner that helps to define the political preferences of the electorate and the options afforded by political parties. Just as obvious is that evolution does not occur in a vacuum, bereft of values, interests, and identities. The challenge is to understand the relationship between the process of defining choice and the content of choices afforded at different stages of the development. The electoral market, in short, is defined by both the transformation of the socio-economic environment that gives rise to more pronounced cleavages in society, and the translation of the social divisions into politically salient forces through the filter of party organization, elections, and parliamentary action. The use of each theory's strengths provides an interactive approach built around the dynamic and the content of party systems in new democracies. Process theory tends to stress the sequential development of party systems through an organizational focus on the number of contenders, their institutional features, and their political relationships. Substance theory is more concerned with the contextual make-up of social cleavages, the ideological and policy spacing of political parties and voters, and the relative saliency of these positions in the political system. The approach employed here builds upon both these theories to present a model of party development in ECE that stresses sequential evolution as an interaction of organizational form and political content.

Further, the development of party systems towards a stable equilibrium does not occur in a vacuum. On the contrary, the configuration of party systems in ECE moves along structured pathways conditioned by both past institutional arrangements and social choices, and by designs for the future. As such, political trajectories are established in the course of social action that must be traced along a path-dependent sequence (Stark, 1992).

Neither the blueprint of a democratic vision, nor the engineering of political institutions is sufficient to install stable political parties capable of ordering choices. But neither is the transition a tabula rasa deprived of all economic interests or political priorities. The past has a

presence that must be taken into account. For that reason, political development is dependent on initial conditioning that goes back to the nature of the communist regimes, the methods of extraction from communist domination, and the adaptation of rules and institutions in the founding period of the democratizing states. All of these provide the context that establishes constraints on political choices and actions, and leave the institutional legacies for the new arrangements in the political system. Path dependency rejects the notion of a chaotic environment without substance or process, as well as the notion of social engineering as capable of creating institutions according to the visionary plan of democratic liberalism (Stark, 1992, pp. 20–22). Instead it looks to the evolutionary character of democratic institutions, including party systems, as consecutive stages that are not the wholesale displacements of the unwanted past, but are reconfigurations that incorporate legacies from prior development phases.

The Transformation of Party Systems

The fluidity of party systems in ECE is self-evident, if only through the collapse of communist domination, the founding of democratic institutions, and the consolidation of democratic structures. The appearance and disappearance of political parties, the formation and breakdown of governing coalitions, the rapid swings in voter support, all testify further to the evolution of parties and party systems during the transition period (see *Table 1*). There are important variations among the individual countries of the region in terms of the pathways taken to build a stable democratic order, although a common conceptual topology can be applied to understand the stages of party formation and system structuring.

The path to democracy is a process built on the experience of the past. It is important, then, to begin with an examination of the nature of the *hegemonic party system* dominated by the ruling communist parties. The conditions contributing to the collapse of this system, and the extent of political opposition, help to define the extractive mode and the emergence of a *polarized party system* constituted along the poles of communist and democratic support. This political bifurcation was more a reflection of the past than the future, and thus gave way to a *fragmented party system* characterized by numerous political parties competing along several dimensions of societal conflict. The unregimented, even chaotic, nature of such political interaction was gradually reduced through political mechanisms and socio-economic changes, leading to the *pluralization of the party system*. These conditions create the potential to form a stable, self-sustaining party environment along well-defined axes of competition, culminating in a *polyarchival party system*. It is important to note that these phases are analytical tools rather than step-wise temporal sequences, so that some cases may not exhibit a progressive evolution along all stages, but may remain within a particular one for a prolonged period, while others may bypass a particular phase altogether.

The transformation of the party systems in ECE is due to alterations in both the supply and the demand sides of the electoral marketplace. The initial move was from a closed system dominated by the monopoly of supply, i.e. the communist ruling coalition infused by ideological domination, to an oligopolistic structure dominated by the communist and opposition movements defined by value competition between the two. The path then led to an anarchy of the marketplace with many potential political suppliers providing different identities, interests, and values, and followed by a political environment characterized by fewer suppliers within a more limited range of substantive competitive issues. At the same time, the demand, that is the sociological, side of the electoral market was subject to intensive changes due to the major transformations introduced after 1989 (Szelenyi and Szelenyi, 1992). This opened up the

possibility of going beyond collective identities defined primarily through the “regime versus society” value prism, ushering in new interests and values among social groups. In this manner, the interactive model combines process and substantive changes to account for the dissolution, formation, and consolidation of party systems in ECE. A closer look at each party system stage will further delineate the forms of interaction between process and substance.

The Hegemonic Party System

The political identity of ECE is being recreated during the transition period. This process cannot be separated from the nature of the political system that is being left behind by the efforts at democratization. The ideology, structure, and identity of communism, or rather its variants in ECE, continue to have a bearing on the nascent party systems.

Communism laid claim to a hegemonic ideological discourse that sought to ban alternative political expressions within the official political space. While hegemony could not be attained

Table 1. Parliamentary elections in East Central Europe

Election year	Lower house size	District type	Vote type	Turnout %	Number of party lists	Number of parties elected	Effective number of party votes	Effective number of party seats
Bulgaria								
June 90	200	Single	Maj.	90.7	39	4	2.75	2.14
	200	Multi	PR 4%					
Oct 91	240	Multi	PR 4%	83.9	41	3	4.19	2.41
Dec 94	240	Multi	PR 4%	75.2	48	5	3.87	2.73
Czechoslovakia								
June 90	150	Multi	PR 5%	96.0	22	8	3.18	1.89
Jun 92	150	Multi	PR 5%	84.6	41	12	7.69	4.80
Slovakia								
Sep 94	150	Multi	PR 5%	75.6	18	7	5.37	4.41
Czech Republic								
Jun 96	200	Multi	PR 5%	76.4	16	6	5.42	4.15
Hungary								
Mar 90	176	Single	Maj.		54	6	6.76	3.74
	152	Multi	PR 4%	62.8				
May 94	58	Nation.			34	6	5.54	2.89
	176	Single	Maj.	68.9				
	152	Multi	PR 5%					
58	Nation.							
Poland								
Jun 89	460	Multi	Maj.	62	111	29	14.69	10.93
Oct 91	391	Multi	PR	43.2				
Sep 93	69	Nation.	PR 5%		35	7	9.81	3.87
	391	Multi	PR 5%	52.0				
	69	Nation.	PR 5%					
Romania								
May 90	396	Multi	PR	86.2	73	18	2.25	2.19
Sep 92	341	Multi	PR 3%	76.2	74	7	7.04	4.75

Sources: International Foundation for Electoral Systems; Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, *Elections in Central and Eastern Europe* (July 1990); Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Reports; Open Media Research Institute, *Transition*; Zdenka Mansfeldova and Herbert Kitschelt, “Elite Strategies in Building Party Alternatives,” Duke University, March 1995; *Pravo*, June 3, 1996.

fully, Marxism–Leninism became a ruling ideology that did not allow an alternative ideological framework and was intolerant of open competition in the political system (Kennedy, 1995, pp. 12–13). To achieve these goals, real existing socialism sought to appropriate all space between the individual and the state through a monopolistic organizational infrastructure. Intermediary associations, political parties, and social movements outside the domain of the party-state were defined as illegitimate. Instead, political space was filled with cultural, social, and economic “transmission belt” associations meant to bind the citizen to the official structure of power.

In this ideological environment, politics was replaced by politicization. Under communism, politics was not a competitive process based on voluntary participation, impartial rules, and open-ended outcomes. Instead ideological and political norms came to politicize decision-making and policy formulation (Bielasiak and Hicks, 1990). Under these circumstances, most citizens did not see political participation as worthwhile, since the public had little opportunity for “inputs” while becoming a recipient of “outputs” devised by the communist powers. In response to the regime’s politicization, real politics could only take the shape of emotional, moral reactions against an unjust political order.

The distinction between politicization and politics came to define the substantive arena of politics. Political interactions were not based on the competition of public interests through bargaining and compromise resting on the foundation of independent associations. Instead political participation in the official world was ritualistic (Marody, 1992). Politics outside the ideological and organizational hegemony of real socialism was identified with a normative world of values and moral codes, and the basic political cleavage at the time was defined in terms of association or opposition to the existing system of domination. The most significant political divide was between the regime and society, between “us” the people and “they” the communist elite. Other forms of identity or interest, whether social standing, class consciousness, or regional affiliation, were blurred under this overarching distinction between regime and society.

The intensity of the divide varied from country to country, becoming most pronounced where the state was in severe crisis and where opposition emerged to offer a more open challenge. In Poland, survey research in the 1980s showed that alongside a silent majority, the most significant division among society was between proponents and opponents of the regime (Adamski and Jasiewicz, 1989, pp. 250–255). In Hungary or Czechoslovakia, attempts to form a “parallel polis” to the official one reflected a similar, but less visible, division. Elsewhere, the regime and society distinction was hidden and muted, although silent “arts of resistance” (Scott, 1990) against communist domination were part of daily life. The political cleavage associated with the period of late communism was bound closely to a normative world view centered around values, and less on specific interests and identities based on economic or social positions. Yet the intensity and openness of the dominant regime–society division had substantial variations in the ECE countries, bearing on subsequent events associated with the collapse of the communist system and the birth of a democratizing process. In that manner, pathways beginning with the structure and substance of political conflicts under communism influenced the mode of extraction from the existing system of power.

The pathways were influenced to a large extent by the organizational set-up of real existing socialism, on both the regime and the opposition side. In the former, the drive towards ideological hegemony depended on the establishment of linkages to various strata of society, through political and intermediary associations depicted as representative of social and economic groups. Even in the political arena, this meant that in several communist states ideological hegemony was compatible with a formal multiparty system, where other political

organizations functioned alongside the “leading role” of the ruling communist party, united in people’s fronts to advance the cause of socialism (Furtak, 1990; Agh, 1994). The various components of these fronts (the ruling communist parties, the allied parties representing the peasantry, intellectuals, or regions, and the associations of workers, women, or youth) had important membership, organizational, and financial resources. Despite the collapse of communism, many of these resources were retained by newly reconstituted successor parties and provided an important organizational benefit in the ensuing democratic competition. For that reason, in most cases, the successor parties sought to schedule the first elections relatively soon, so as to make use of this advantage.

Beyond the organizational framework of communism, there was to be no independent institutional space under really existing socialism. One legacy of the communist system upon its collapse was thus to leave a large organizational vacuum, with most segments of society devoid of middle level associations or political parties as vehicles of representation. The exception were the movements that had emerged in opposition to the communist system of power, reflecting the regime–society political cleavage. The visibility, strength, and resource base of these movements varied considerably, ranging from the mass appeal of Solidarity in Poland, to the vocal dissident groups in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, to the embryo of a political alternative in the ecological movement of Bulgaria. In all instances, these movements were to emerge as important political actors in the transition from communism to a democratizing political system.

The hegemonic party system was a significant element in structuring the process of party evolution after the collapse of real socialism. It did so by shaping the substantive cleavage in the emerging system along the inherited regime–society division, muting for the time being other political interests and aspiring political parties. Moreover, it gave an institutional frame to the new political space. It did so through the organizational resources retained by the successor and allied parties to the communist popular fronts, and through the value legitimation accorded to opposition groups representing the society side of the dominant cleavage. Equally significant was the large institutional void created by the collapse of the organizational structure of communism, leaving an extensive open political society in the ruins of communism.

The Polarized Party System

The substantive divide between regime and society was carried over to the initial phase of post-communism, expressed foremost in the political struggle between the successor to the ruling communist party and an umbrella social movement embracing various sectors of society. This stage of political development corresponds to the “founding election” moment in the post-authoritarian systems (Turner, 1993; O’Donnell and Schmitter, 1986). In the case of the ECE states, it first took the form of a plebiscite on the communist system. As such, it was essentially a reflection on the past rather than a formation of a stable party system for the future. The “founding” was in the creation of new institutional rules of governance that legitimized political contestation and accepted the principle of electoral choice. In that sense, all political forces rejected the hegemonic system formed around the “leading role of the party” principle, including the successor parties to the ruling communists. Just like the opposition, they now proclaimed their repudiation of political monopoly in favor of a pluralism of political ideas. The founding elections were thus primarily ratifications of a systemic transformation from communism towards democracy.

The specific content of who shall rule was left open to the uncertainty of the political contest

in the first wave of post-communist elections. The primary contenders in the rivalry reflected the political cleavage of regime and society, albeit in a new organizational guise. The former opposition was able to emerge into the open, as in Poland, Hungary, or Czechoslovakia (Barany and Vinton, 1990; Jasiewicz, 1991), or constituted itself into a political movement based on a more amorphous public sentiment, as in Bulgaria or Romania (Ashley, 1990; Nelson, 1990). The ruling communist parties had disbanded or reformed, to emerge as social democratic political actors committed to the new system. In most instances, neither the new political parties nor the electorate were able to devise clear policy programs and demands, nor establish symbolic links that transcended the former regime–society divide. In substantive terms, this signified both the perpetuation of the politics of the past, reflective of a world of values and norms around the issue of communism, and the uncertainty of an alternative embracing a world of values around the vision of a democratic, market society.

The political contest at the founding period was waged about normative judgments tied to systemic evaluations, about the past and about the future. The criteria of politics rested more within these normative constructions than in the more mundane evaluations of specific advantages or disadvantages formed around the identities and interests of class, gender, occupation, or region. The pull of the past, the hope for the future, and the uncertainty of the present were too strong to transcend this political world.

The polarization in the substance of politics found resonance in the organizational form and process of political competition. The electoral contest in the founding period was bifurcated between a social movement representing the anti-communist alternative and the organization of a reconstructed communist field. The first depended primarily on its symbolic virtue to attract support, the latter hoped to translate its organizational heritage into a strong showing in the first free elections.

For the opposition, its past struggle with communism, its commitment to a democratic politics, and its political ethos were cause enough to stand above the divisiveness of politics and proclaim a societal consensus founded upon the previous regime–society cleavage. The aim was to form an “umbrella” movement that did not represent partisan identities and interests, but sought rather to carry forth the solidarity of the struggle against communism. The purpose here was to use unity derived from the past to build a better tomorrow, through the transformation of the economy and the polity. The claim to the representation of the entire nation and to a collective will dedicated to a common purpose was meant to facilitate the tasks of systemic transformation.

Consensual politics was to be the mantle of the new politics forged by these umbrella movements. In Poland, Solidarity had established such an identity during its decade of scimmages with the communist regime (Zubek, 1991). Elsewhere, consensus movements emerged during the final struggle, for example the Civic Forum and Public against Violence in Czechoslovakia, to create a common identity out of their oppositional activities (Bankowicz, 1991). In Bulgaria the movement was more explicitly a coalition of forces, the Union of Democratic Forces, brought together to negotiate and compete with the communists (Petrova and Kanev, 1992). The exception to the pattern was Hungary, where bifurcation never took hold. Instead, a party orientation emerged from the start, including several competing opposition parties. But even here, the Hungarian Democratic Forum and the Alliance of Free Democrats attempted to define their political identity as the legitimate heirs to the anti-communist struggle, and to emerge as “catch-all parties” with broad popular support across the socio-economic landscape (Racz, 1991).

Noteworthy also is the continued identification of the umbrella social movements with the

“antipolitics” perspective, despite their engagement in electoral politics. Their very names, as forums, unions, or alliances, defied the world of parties and politics. More importantly, their identities were bound to the realm of values, not interests, so as to forge an affective attachment between the public and the movement. Rather than build upon the particular interests of defined social groups, and move forward with the organization of mass politics, the consensus movements preferred to stand on a high moral ground to attract broad support from all sectors of society.

On the other side of the polarized political system stood the remnants of the communist regimes (Ishiyama, 1995). For them, there was no hope in an appeal to moral values and collective solidarity. The path to political success lay rather in specific appeals to self-interest among segments of society, and in the organizational and membership strengths retained from the hegemonic phase. To that end, the first priority was to recast the ideological content through an overt rejection of the Marxist–Leninist doctrine. All the mainstream successor parties abandoned the leading role of the party principle in favor of an open electoral contest. To signal their new commitment and appeal to the voters, all the ruling communist parties were renamed as social democratic or left parties (Bielasiak, 1992b). In most cases there was also no attempt to mask the “party” label, which was part of the new identity, to attract support from former members and social groups concerned with growing economic dislocation.

The outcomes of the polarized contest between the opponents of communism and its heirs varied across the region. Where the opposition was visible and commanded the moral high ground, it succeeded in claiming victory in the founding election. First in Poland, in a semi-free election, Solidarity was able to claim virtually all seats subject to an open contest (Olson, 1993b). In Czechoslovakia, Civic Forum and Public against Violence obtained a substantial plurality, as did the parties emerging out of the opposition movement in Hungary (Wightman, 1991; Racz, 1991). In those states where opposition was absent or weak during the days of communism, the successor parties were able to retain power during the founding period, as in Bulgaria (Zlatkov, 1992). The situation in Romainia was more ambiguous, as the National Salvation Front claimed to represent the revolutionary opposition to the Ceausescu regime, but was led by many former communist leaders (Gallagher, 1991).

Regardless of the outcome, the founding elections did not resolve the political dilemmas faced by the new democracies of ECE. To a very large extent, the forces present at the time were still imbedded in the former communist system and represented the regime–society divide of the past. The main axis of political competition was defined in those “value” terms, and did not address sufficiently the emerging problems and issues of the transition towards marketization and democratization. Under the circumstances, the polarized political system had to give way to new political cleavages and new political parties.

The Fragmented Political System

The increasing irrelevancy of the communist–anticommunist axis of political competition in the face of systemic transformations led to a wide opening up of the political marketplace to new claimants for power. There were two primary sources for the multiplicity of political actors in this stage of party development, a period associated most closely with the time preceding the second elections in the post-communist states. The first was due to the disintegration of the umbrella movements, which could not sustain a unity based primarily on the “negation” of communism, and thus split into competing political forces with different programs for the future. The second came from the wave of new political actors that emerged to test the electoral

waters. The consequence was rapid fragmentation of the political space with a dozen aspiring political parties and movements competing for a share of the popular support and vote.

Fragmentation was the natural response to the continuing confusion produced by changes in the economic and social environment. The demand side of the electoral market, society at large, was undergoing a profound process of economic and social transformation subject to considerable uncertainty and chaos (Bunce and Csanadi, 1993). In this context, collective political identities and interests were weak. The interest structure present under communism was increasingly superfluous to the new economy, and the allocation of values through the “we” versus “they” solidarities spoke of a past political struggle. In addition, the collapse of the communist system left a substantial vacuum in the organizational life of post-communism. The result was a low density of associations in the intermediary space of politics, precluding the linkages between the public and political parties facilitated by social networks (Rychard, 1992). Instead, the potential electorate remained largely unaffiliated, either through organizational ties or political identities.

One consequence was to provide an open political space on the supply side of electoral competition (Mair, 1991). The uncertainty of socio-economic interests and political cleavages during the transition produced new opportunities for aspiring political actors. Since the market for political allegiance was open, multiple entrants sought to gain a share of electoral support around diverse issues (Jasiewicz, 1993; Korosenyi, 1993). Due to the lack of dominant axes of competition, political parties could appeal to the voters on the basis of a variety of economic, national, ethnic, religious, cultural, and political dimensions. The hope for each political entrant was that it could define politics along its chosen issue, to render that dimension the primary axis of competition, and so obtain a significant share of voter support on the basis of its issue appeal.

To accomplish that aim, many political aspirants had to wage a struggle that moved beyond the communist–anticommunist polarization. The latter space was already well occupied by incumbents on both sides of the political divide. To make progress on the competitive front, new political elites had no recourse but to challenge the dominance of the bifurcated axis of competition. In this task, they were aided by the growing irrelevancy of the old divisions to the new social and economic realities. The political contest had to be reconfigured away from the value laden regime–society perspective to take into account new issue dimensions as the defining modes of politics. The dilemma for all political actors, old and new, was that the resolution of these issues was still highly contingent, and reinforced the uncertainty about the ordering of substantive political competition.

Uncertainty about the emerging content of politics was reinforced by an open political space characterized by low costs of entry into the electoral marketplace. On the one hand, a large number of voters were not saturated by partisanship and loyalty to existing parties, providing an uncaptured audience as targets for the new parties. On the other hand, rules for registration of political parties and for electoral competition did not present significant obstacles to entry. The consequence was to attract numerous competitors to the electoral contests, culminating in a rapid fragmentation of the political space in ECE.

The sources for the new political parties and movements varied considerably, producing dozens of registered political organizations in each country. One pattern was the dismemberment of the umbrella movements which could not retain a cohesiveness built upon the “negative” task of opposition to communism. Instead, divergence built around personal ambitions, program tasks, and political strategies came to dominate the consensus movements and culminated in their splintering in the wake of new elections. Solidarity in Poland, The Civic Forum and Public

Against Violence in Czechoslovakia, the National Salvation Front in Romania all splintered along political and personal lines (Lewis, 1995; Kopecky, 1995). In Hungary and Bulgaria, the ruling or oppositional coalitions and their component parties were also subject to factional infighting that paralleled the diffusion of the umbrella movements (Lomax, 1995; Waller, 1995).

An even more pronounced fragmentation of the political space resulted from the revival, reinvigoration, and formation of parties with roots along several dimensions of political competition (Bielasiak, 1992b). Some emerged from the former satellite parties of the communist era, reconstituted as independent political entities representing important sectors of society, most notably the peasantry. Other sought to revive historical allegiances by reclaiming the political identities of the past. Since these nostalgia parties sought to re-establish the natural interests of constituencies from the interwar period, many reflected the circumstances of that period: agrarian, Christian–democratic, and Christian–nationalist programs dominated, but some also reflected liberal ideas of free enterprise and privatization. Further currents to emerge upon the political scene at this time claimed nationalist and ethnic identities as the basis for political organization and competition. In most countries, these presented strong appeals for the collective identity of voters, either on the basis of minority status or in the name of an integral nationalism. In contrast to these “old politics,” there were also entrants making claims to “new politics,” primarily through appeals to ecological issues. Finally, one can point to a splintering of the socialist political field, ranging across doctrinaire to social democratic parties, as an additional source of fragmentation.

The sheer number and nature of these parties and movements testifies to a wide spectrum of political space, open to competition along several substantive axes. But it was a space filled primarily at the top of the system, with politics very much in command over socio-economic competitive foundations. Most of the political competitors lacked any significant social base or mass appeal. They consisted of elites seeking to attain political leverage without existing constituencies, but rather through the projection of future visions built around “imaginary” interests that were awaiting to emerge and shape the political space of the new democracies. As such, these political entities had a low level of institutionalization, lacking both a membership base and an organizational infrastructure that could be used to political advantage (see Sartori, 1976). The one partial exception was the successor parties to the ruling communists, which did inherit important organizational resources. For the moment, however, these were handicapped by a political inheritance which had negative repercussions for their institutionalization capability.

The overall pattern, as a result, was a political overhang during the fragmentation phase of party development. There were too many competing “sellers” with confusing identities, unclear programs, marginal support, and few connections to society. The result was a dysfunction between political supply and demand: an oversupply of political actors without roots in the social fabric, and an underdeveloped socio-economic structure that could form a pattern for collective political identities and establish links to party organizations. This condition created the illusion of an open hand for political gamesmanship. Without strong institutional identities or attachments to societal groups to act as a brake, political defections and reconstitutions were perceived as relatively low costs. The consequence was further fragmentation of the political system due to repeated dealignments and realignments among political parties and parliamentary clubs. This only reinforced the difficulties in establishing meaningful, permanent identities for the parties, by confusing the choices provided to the voters even more.

The political space in the electoral market was not only fragmented, but also chaotic. Political

parties with weak identities were seeking the support of voters uncertain of the political programs and of their own interests in a rapidly changing environment. The appeals of parties for popular backing were along a diversity of dimensions, involving economic marketization, national and ethnic identity, and political legacies. Such an extensively open political space could not establish an equilibrium, much less maintain one. A sequence of elections helped to define winners and losers, and moved the system to a more manageable scale of political competition.

The Pluralist Party System

The pluralization of the party structure overlapped with the fragmentation phase, when the competition for a place in the electoral system acted as a filter to define the significant political actors and arenas of competition. The second wave of elections in ECE provided such a screening, reducing the number of legitimate contenders for power and defining more visibly the principal cleavages in society.

On the political “supply” side, the mechanics of the electoral process accomplished the task of filtering parties to a more viable number. From the hundreds of quasi-party groups intent on contesting the election in each country, several dozen were able to organize into formal entities, and no more than about two or three dozen were able to register as parties with candidate lists. The election outcome was a final arbiter, when many of the contenders were precluded from entering the parliaments of ECE (Olson, 1993a, pp. 630–631). Parties capable of taking part in decision-making were thus confined to a more effective number. When this was not the case, as in the 1991 election in Poland that returned 29 party lists to the Sejm, the electoral procedure for the subsequent round of elections was tightened, either through more compelling registration demands or new voting thresholds for entry into parliament (Gebethener, 1993b). The imposition of a 5 per cent minimum for the 1993 Polish elections had the effect of bringing down the number of significant parties in the Sejm to six. In turn, the activities of the parliamentary parties, by giving priority to specific issues, helped to define the political space in terms of ideological dimensions and programmatic solutions.

The political process, then, acted as an important instrument in the ordering of political competition, the consolidation of political parties, and the structuring of a more effective party system. The winners in the electoral contests were able to claim representation of the dominant axes of competition, and pursued policies that reinforced this dimension on the political scene and in the public mind. The losers tended to represent political cleavages with less saliency, or occupied a narrow political space that splintered the vote among several contenders with similar programs. In either case, the election result forced the losing parties either to abandon hopes for political support, forcing many to disband, or to seek re-entry into the political contest through a redefinition of their program or consolidation with other parties. The end result of the political filtering was a significant step beyond the previous chaotic fragmentation of the party system.

On the other side of the electoral market, the demand function among the public moved along as well in consequence of the reform agendas and economic changes produced by the post-communist transformation (Whitefield and Evans, 1995). The sociological picture of society began to be defined in more tangible terms, with more ordered aspirations and interests in evidence. Under the impact of actual and intended changes in post-communist society, individuals became increasingly aware of their place, status, and interest in the new system, whether in terms of class position, ethnic or gender identity, or political ideology (Kennedy, 1995, p. 4). The emergence of collective identities and interests facilitated the formation of

intermediary associations and interest groups representing the new world of marketization and democratization, rather than the former communist structure or the bifurcated world of communism–anticommunism. The ordering of social interests and the political filtering contributed to the emergence of more defined political parties. Political competition began to move away from the former substantive world of values, where normative judgements tended to be made in the absolute categories of right or wrong, to more specific interests defined by the calculus of individual and group advantage or disadvantage.

Time was not only a factor in ordering societal interests but also affected the political judgments of the electorate. Initial reliance upon the value dimension of regime–society or upon “prospective” voting around the benefits and costs of a future capitalist order, gave way to a more informed choice based upon “retrospective” voting as an evaluation of incumbent policies and performance (Kitschelt, 1994, p. 25). Voters simply became more cognizant of their interests in the changing socio-economic environment and of the way that political programs were likely to affect their standing in the new society. This increase in cognitive capability allowed for the appearance of a main axis of competition in the political arena, formed around economic issues.

The advent of the primary cleavage around the economic dimension is not surprising, in view of the drive towards marketization and privatization in most of ECE. Individual positions in the workplace and the market are profoundly affected by such changes, and must find an outlet in political choices. The significance of economic reform as a defining issue in the political space rests with the emergence of the left–right as a principal arena of competition. For some time, the left–right spectrum under post-communism has been deformed due to the legacies of the past and the visions of the future: the past because of the association of a left-defined program with the abuses of the communist system, which made the public initially suspicious of leftist ideology; the future due to the initial euphoria about capitalism and democracy, which produced an utopian vision of the market among many sectors of society. The realities of the transition, however, led to an obvious awareness that the transformation could not be painless. Under the circumstances, issues about the role of the market and of the state in post-communist society, about the provision of safety nets, and about social inequality, emerged as a concern for many citizens (Mason, 1995). This trend restored the left–right cleavage to a normal place in political contestation, expressed primarily around the question of the “welfare state.”

The emergence of the left–right axis into the forefront of post-communist politics did not signify the elimination of other conflicts in the political arena. Indeed, other issues have remained on the political agenda, albeit in most cases as secondary to the economic concerns about the effects of marketization. Among these issues, ethnic, nationalist, and pan-European identities as the basis for popular sentiments and party programs are critical in many states (Shafir, 1994; Wolchik, 1994). In other countries, urban–rural, secular–religious, and democratic–authoritarian cleavages remain as important political differences.

The establishment of a pluralist party structure is the outgrowth of socio-economic changes and political choices that helped to reduce the numerous political cleavages to a manageable number of salient issues, and to order the dimensions of political competition. The process of electoral structuring helped to define the supply side of the political market by reducing the number of viable contenders. The social and economic transformation helped to structure the demand side of politics by better defining the interests of groups in society. Together these have contributed to the coalescence of the substantive dimension of political cleavages under post-communism. Yet the transformation of the social and political systems has not translated into a strong interrelationship between the two.

The connection between political parties and the public rests primarily in the realm of

Table 2. Public opinion (%) on political parties in East Central Europe, 1993–1994

	Net party identification	Net party trust	Vote for		
			Largest party	Other parties	Don't know
Bulgaria	NA	– 62	24	38	38
Czech Republic	– 8	– 14	30	51	19
Hungary	– 33	– 54	17	40	43
Poland	– 45	– 64	23	61	16
Romania	NA	– 44	18	64	18
Slovakia	– 24	– 42	20	55	25

Source: Richard Rose (1995) based on data from New Democracies Barometer III, 26 November 1993–14 April 1994 surveys.

perceptions, not organizational ties or loyalties based on historical attachment. Voters and elites can define the ideological positioning of parties and the programmatic distinctions among them, but this has not led to the formation of strong partisanship among the electorate (see *Table 2*). The roots of political parties to constituencies continue to be precarious, as the institutionalization of political parties remains relatively weak (Rose, 1995). With few exceptions, primarily the successor parties to the communist fronts of the hegemonic era, parties remain cadre formations rather than mass organizations with large memberships and extensive infrastructures. They function more in the area of parliamentary than constituency politics. In that sense, the identification of cleavages among parties and voters is the reflection of political spacing, and not of significant bonding that helps in the representation and articulation of identifiable interests in society.

The continuing institutional underdevelopment of political parties in ECE affects the potential consolidation of the party system (see Dix, 1992). Because they remain largely elite formations that are only weakly bound to constituency preferences, the propensity to seek further support contributes to the fluidity of political positioning. Similarly, it means that party leaders are not firmly restricted by commitments, but can express ambitions and disagreements more openly, without fear of being cut off from a strong support base. This factor helps to explain the high degree of factionalism among many of the dominant parties in the region, as well as the continued splintering of party factions into new political identities, the reconfiguration of old into new political parties and coalitions, and the emergence of new contenders hoping to attract constituent support. The continuing fluidity also means that extraparliamentary parties which have not attracted sufficient popular support to enter the legislative body retain the belief that political circumstances are sufficiently flexible to allow them representation in the political system at a future point in time. The factionalism of the parliamentary parties and the aspirations of the extraparliamentary ones continue to plague the party structure of post-communism, impeding a stable political equilibrium.

Conclusion

The movement from party fragmentation to a pluralist party system in ECE is evident, but not complete. For that reason, it is more appropriate to talk about the pluralization of the party system than to proclaim the stability of a polyarchical party structure defined by strong parties

with roots in the constituency. The process of politics built around elections is an important new accomplishment of the democratizing states. It has played an important role in shaping the party system into a more mature, more tangible political space where voters can discern different policy options. Similarly, the ongoing social and economic transformation of the former communist states has with time introduced an understanding of new interests and new priorities. Together, the process of party evolution and the substance of social differentiation have helped to define the demands of the electorate on the political system and the main areas of political competition. Old structures and old struggles are being left behind, and from a multitude of new options, the political field is narrowing to a more manageable dimension. The stabilization of this process, however, remains circumscribed by the continuing weakness of political parties as organizations with close ties to relevant constituencies. The weakness of party institutionalization prevents the final shift of the political structure to a consolidated equilibrium rooted in a close interrelationship between society and polity. This final step is necessary to move the party system away from its propensity to factionalism and fluidity, and towards a polyarchical maturity characterized by stable party formations constrained in their maneuvering by the interests of identifiable constituencies.

Still, we should not lose sight of the progress made in the structuring of party systems in ECE. Stable democracy after all is about choice, a choice offered through a political society defined by meaningful options. From the hegemony of communism, through the polarized worlds of communism–anticommunism, through the chaos of fragmentation, the party systems have come around to offer a more informed choice to the voters. After all, democracy is about choice, but it is about informed choice. It is thus dependent on knowledgeable electoral consumers with established identities and interests, and functioning social associations that provide the necessary linkages to the party system. It is also dependent on the supply of meaningful programs by political actors that represent the main cleavages in society and are able to compete along well-defined axes of political competition. The political structure of ECE has moved in a short period of time from no choice and too much choice, to a terrain where choice is more meaningful because it is ordered both by the “supply” of political actors and by a more informed public capable of articulating “demands” reflecting its new identities and interests.

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