

Hurricane Season: Systems of Instability in Central and East European Party Politics

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The seemingly random triumph and demise of new political parties in Central and Eastern Europe actually represent a durable subsystem with relevance for party systems around the world. This article supplements existing research on volatility with new measures of party age distribution that reveal clear patterns of disruption, turnover and restabilization. These patterns emerge from stable and coherent party subsystems that follow a simple model based on three dynamics: losses by established parties, rapid gains by uncorrupted newcomers, and equally rapid newcomer losses to even newer parties. Confirmed both by electoral evidence and computer simulations, this model offers insight into the endurance of these subsystems, particularly since the very mechanisms that generate new parties' success can preclude their ability to survive in subsequent elections. Central and Eastern European party systems offer a laboratory for understanding trends in party system volatility that are emerging in Western Europe and across the globe.

Keywords: *volatility; new parties; party systems; party subsystems; Central and Eastern Europe*

For the moment, the byword for political disaster in Central and Eastern Europe is “earthquake.” The list of elections described in seismic terms is long and growing: Bulgaria (2001), Poland (2001), Hungary (2010), the Czech Republic (2010 and 2013), and Slovenia (2011 and 2014). Elections like these can involve swings of more than 40 percent and give pluralities to parties still in their infancy. Even “normal” elections bring tremors as parties come and go, merge and splinter.

As metaphors go, “earthquake” has certain advantages. There are few better images of sudden, massive disruptions and little expectation of precise predictions. Instead, both seismologists and political scientists gather evidence on deeper underlying factors to identify hotspots and generate likelihoods.

But there is need for a new comparison. Earthquakes involve large and coherent structures in tension with one another whereas party politics consists of multiple, independent institutions with their own internal structures. Major shifts in voting

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patterns depend not only on structural clash but also on the actions of individual political parties in direct response to one another. The aim of this article is to advance the state of research on rapid political shifts with improved measures of party system change and a new conceptual model that accounts for the rapid changes found in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and other regions as well.

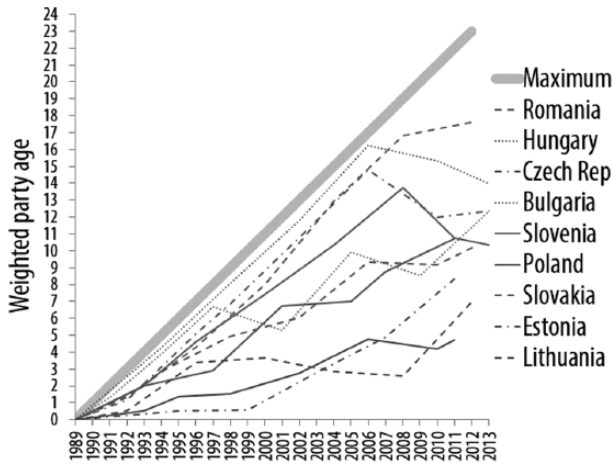
Our new measures confirm current findings that political shifts in CEE depend largely on the entrance of new parties and the exit of established ones and go beyond that to demonstrate significant differences in behavior between newer and older parties, at both the elite and voter levels. Political dissatisfaction sometimes produces flows of voters and elites among established parties, but in CEE the flow is often to new parties. These new parties have more fragile political appeals and organizations and they are even more likely to suffer desertion than their more established counterparts. Since most of those who give up on new parties do not return to the more established parties but instead move on to other new alternatives, the result is a self-reinforcing subsystem of ever newer parties that endures until parties succeed in adopting stabilizing mechanisms. This subsystem model of overall party system dynamics in the Central and Eastern European democracies explains both the variability in the timing of electoral shifts and the persistence of these internally volatile subsystems once they become established. The model also provides us leverage for understanding potential dangers and evaluating potential remedies, which is particularly important because the changes in CEE appear to be harbingers of a change in party systems that is happening on a much wider geographical canvas.

Beginning with a discussion of current variables on party system change, the article goes on to provide new data on party age and introduce the variable of age distribution. The article finds an increasingly pervasive pattern of stable, older parties and a subsystem of newer and less stable parties engaged in accelerating party-level cycles of birth, death, and replacement. The final section of the article speculates on the proximate explanations of and alternatives to these subsystems and their broader relevance.

Measurement: Volatility and Weighted Age

The most widely used tool to measure the degree of party system change—the Richter scale of electoral earthquakes—is Pedersen’s index of volatility, an easily operationalized quantitative measurement of the extent of change between elections.¹ But like the Richter scale, which is no longer regarded as a sufficient measure, Pedersen’s index can conceal as much as it reveals. As an aggregate measure, not only does it ignore individual-level party switches that cancel one another out but it also conflates shifts of voters *within* a stable institutional core of parties with shifts of voters necessitated by the institutional comings and goings of parties themselves.² Avoiding this conflation, Powell and Tucker find that volatility among established CEE parties has been smaller than the extra-system volatility associated with the appearance and disappearance of parties. But even their revised measure—a huge step forward in systems with fluid political institutions—offers only a partial

Figure 1
Weighted party average age for Eastern and Central Europe, 1990–2014



Source: Authors’ calculations are based on M. Kreuzer and V. Pettai, “Persistence and Decline versus Transience and Genesis” (paper presented at the Joint Sessions of the European Consortium for Political Research, St. Gallen, Switzerland, 2011); S. Berglund et al., *The Handbook of Political Change in Eastern Europe* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2013); and Political Data Yearbook: Interactive, n.d., <http://politicaldatayearbook.com/> (accessed 10 July 2014).

resolution because it does not account for the component parts of the system or allow simultaneous comparisons across multiple elections. Their measure recognizes that the newness is important and offers snapshots of who goes in and out of the main doors but it cannot tell us (except by accident) how long they have remained inside.

Kreuzer and Pettai’s study of parties in the Baltic states seeks to remedy this gap with the Weighted Party Age Index (WPAI), a supplementary measure of institutional novelty that sets aside questions about shifts among parties and looks instead at the length of time since a party’s establishment.³ To the extent that “newness” is important, as many scholars including Sikk, Mainwaring, Bolleyer, and Powell and Tucker⁴ agree, Kreuzer and Pettai’s measure provides a useful indicator of the relative newness in a system. Figure 1, applying the WPAI to ten CEE countries, indicates extremely wide variation ranging from Romania, whose party system grew older by roughly one year for every year of its existence, suggesting extreme stability, to the Baltic states, where constant replacement and reinvention gave the party systems a perpetual youth. In the beginning of the 2010s, however, the values began a mild convergence. The graph shows that beginning in 2008, the average age range between the highest and lowest stopped growing and actually began to decline as the older systems of Romania, the Czech Republic, and Hungary suddenly experienced a drop in average age, while the parties of the Baltics began to survive elections.

From a mathematical perspective, average age and extra-system volatility should be related, at least at the top and bottom of the scales,⁵ but between these extremes there is no direct correspondence, since new parties may replace old parties and produce a large drop in age, or they may replace new parties for only a slight shift. Empirically, the average age in Central and Eastern Europe tends to move with extra-system volatility and the correlation for each country is positive (more volatility correlated with younger systems), but the two are not identical, and the correlations for individual countries range between 0.2 and 0.8.

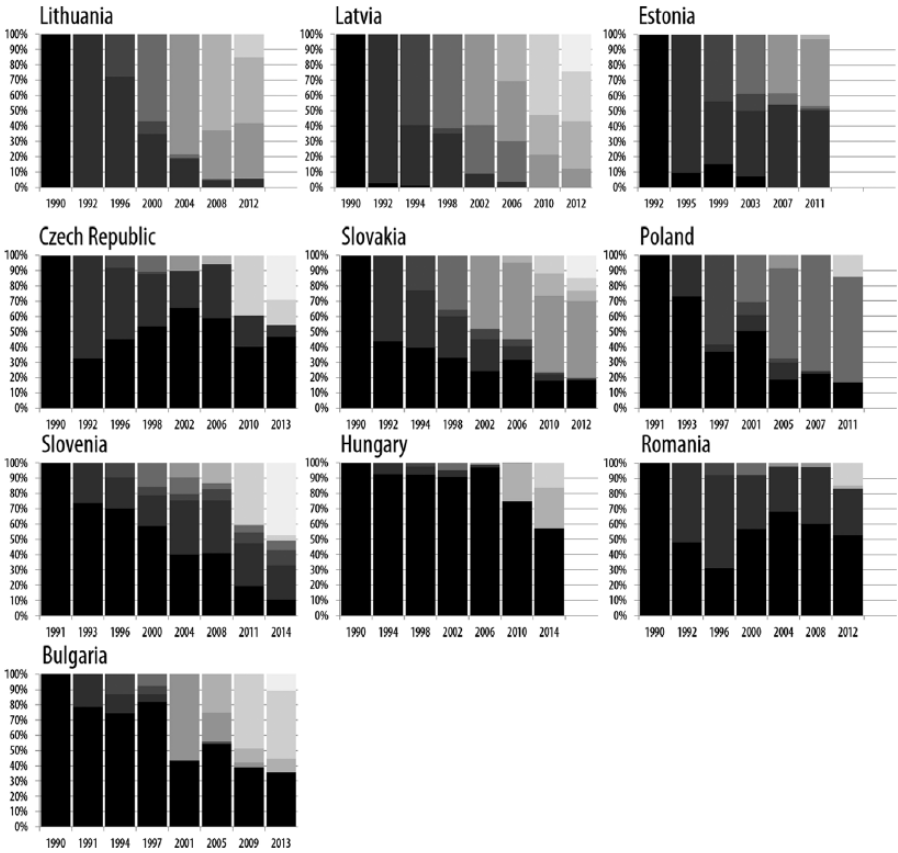
Classification: Patterns of Disruption, Turnover, and (Re)stabilization

Since summary measures can only tell us so much, it is useful to turn to richer but less simply summarized data—the actual distribution of parties according to age in any given electoral period for any given country. The graphic depiction of party age in Figure 2 divides the share of votes in each election according to the period in which a party first appeared. An entirely black column represents an election in which all parties receiving votes were founded during the first election under consideration. An entirely white column represents a system in which all parties receiving votes emerged in the most recent election. Shades of grey represent parties of intermediate age; the darker the shade, the earlier the party was founded.

These data reveal additional distinctions. The countries in the middle of the average age range actually demonstrate quite significant differences in configuration. In 2013, both Poland and Bulgaria produced an average age of 11 years, but the Polish system consisted largely of 11-year-old parties whereas Bulgaria's party system average resulted from a combination of some parties more than 20 years old and others less than 5 years old. Poland's big changes were systemwide: nearly the entire party system changed radically in the early 2000s as early-generation parties were replaced by middle-generation parties and subsequently developed a degree of renewed stability and fewer newcomers. Bulgaria's changes cut the system in half: one segment of the party system remained stable while the other half experienced constant churn.

While the visual distribution is a useful technique for quickly grasping the differences, it does not permit easy quantitative comparisons between systems. It does, however, identify the variable for which a quantitative measure is necessary: the relative weight of parties from various periods. Fortunately, measurement of distribution is well established, and we adapt a summary measure for distribution developed by Esteban and Ray⁶ as an improvement to basic measures of polarization of income. Because this measure incorporates the relative weights and distances of all data points, it is responsive to widely spaced peaks (bi- and multimodal distributions) and produces higher values as the peaks move away from one another.

Figure 2
Share of vote for parties in each election according to age of party founding
(darkest = oldest)



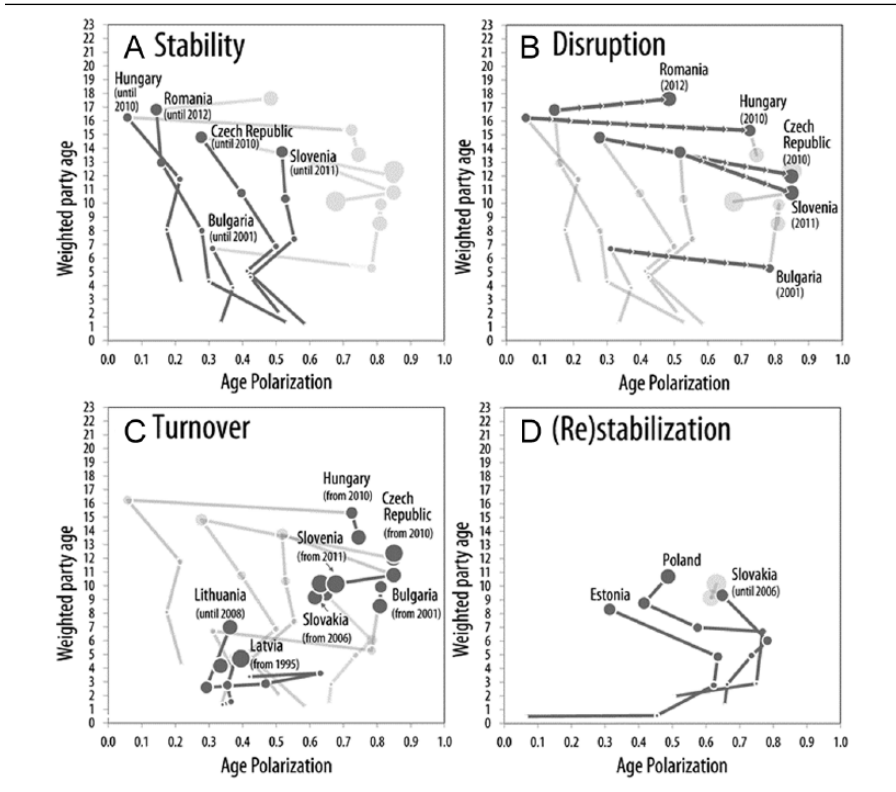
Source: Authors' calculations are based on M. Kreuzer and V. Pettai, "Persistence and Decline versus Transience and Genesis" (paper presented at the Joint Sessions of the European Consortium for Political Research, St. Gallen, Switzerland, 2011); S. Berglund et al., *The Handbook of Political Change in Eastern Europe* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2013); and Political Data Yearbook: Interactive, n.d., <http://politicaldatayearbook.com/> (accessed 10 July 2014).

The framework formula as proposed by Esteban and Ray is

$$P(\pi, y) = \sum_{i=1}^n \sum_{j=1}^n \pi_i \pi_j T(I(\pi_i), a(\delta(y_i, y_j)))$$

which can be adapted to the measurement of party age distribution as follows:

Figure 3
Weighted party system age and age polarization over time in Central and Eastern European party system

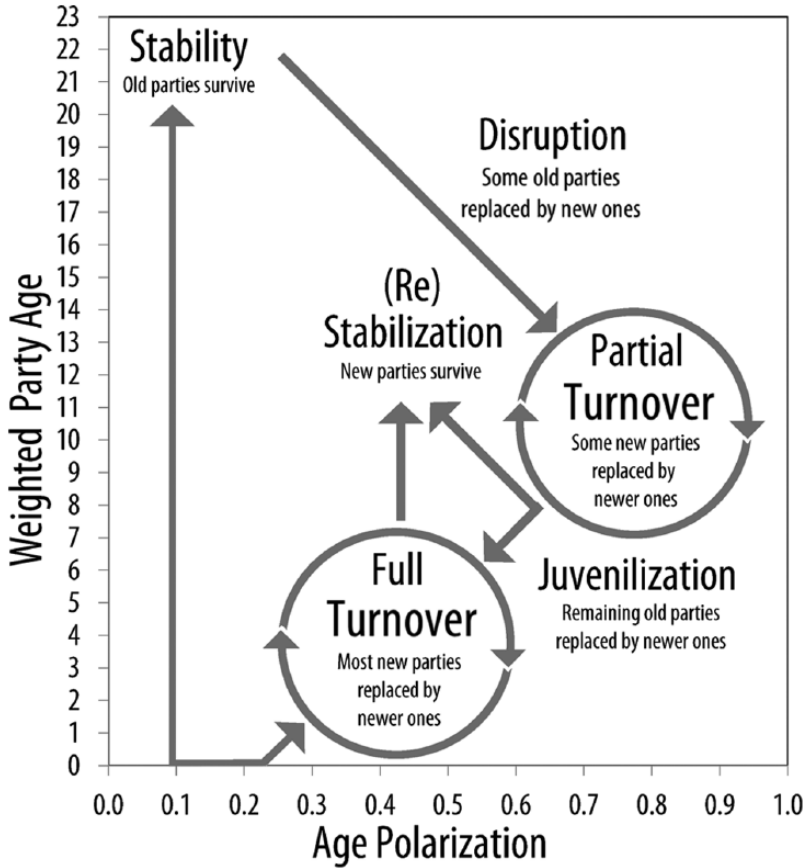


the total share of vote held by parties first appearing in election i (π_i) * Total share of vote for parties first appearing in election j (π_j) * Duration of the period (in years) separating i and j , summed for all i and j .

The panels in Figure 3 graphs the weighted party age index against the age distribution measures for each country at each election, with panels highlighting specific patterns. These patterns are summarized without country detail in Figure 4.

Figure 3A shows the *stability* path, in which early-generation parties endure and few new parties emerge, resulting in lines covering significant vertical distance and tending toward the low-polarization side of the graph. As might be expected from its high average age and the absence of major new entrants, the Romanian party system progresses straight upward with age, increasing by four years in each four-year

Figure 4
Schematized patterns of party age and party polarization



period, and polarization remains low because all parties fall on the “old” end of the spectrum. Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovenia followed a similar upward path until the early 2010s, with systems composed almost entirely of old parties. Bulgaria followed this path until 2001.

Figure 3B shows the *disruption* path, with upward movement stopping or even reversing and significant movement toward the right side of the graph, as new parties emerge to rival enduring older parties and produce a bimodal distribution of ages. The disruption lines are most pronounced where party systems have low initial age distributions. The panel clearly shows the impact of the Popular Party of Dan Diaconescu in Romania; that of Jobbik and Politics Can Be Different in Hungary;

Public Affairs and TOP '09 in the Czech Republic; and Positive Slovenia and Virant's List in Slovenia, each of which disrupted the uniform aging of the party system and split the party system between a substantial but diminished group of old parties and a smaller but significant group of new parties. The same pattern is clear as early as 2001 in the Bulgarian party system, giving a sense of the overwhelming change created by the Movement of Simeon II (NDSV).

Figure 3C shows the *turnover* path in which new parties yield to even newer parties. The *partial*-turnover configuration appears in the center right of the graph, reflecting the shift from new parties to newer ones in systems that also retain significant numbers of older parties. The *full*-turnover configuration appears in the lower left of the graph, where the replacements across the board keep both age and polarization relatively low. Bulgaria offers a representative example of partial turnover: support for the new NDSV gradually evaporated over two election cycles, but other new parties emerged to replace it, so both the average age and the bipolar age distribution stayed essentially unchanged. Slovakia's political party system after 2006 shows a similar pattern, with new parties emerging to supplant old ones on the country's right and in its Hungarian minority. Recent elections in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovenia likewise exhibit partial turnover as some or all of the new parties faded and newer parties emerged with similar levels of support. Latvia and Lithuania come close to full turnover thanks to elections in which new parties of previous elections lose to even newer entrants, resulting in an essentially new party system every four to eight years. Along with their low average age, these systems exhibit a narrower distribution of age between young and old simply because few parties survived to enjoy old age.

Finally, Figure 3D shows the *(re)stabilization* path in which turnover stops and new parties survive. The paths of Poland, Slovakia, and Estonia (and potentially Lithuania and Latvia) show what happens when new parties survive their early years and allow party age to grow again. These cases are relatively few in number, however, and as the example of Slovakia shows, the restabilization proves to be merely an interlude before the resumption of turnover.

Conceptualization: Systems, Subsystems, and Cycles of Reinforcement

As Kreuzer and Pettai observe, "instability can have patterns just as distinct as those of stability,"⁷⁷ and the previous section offers evidence both that the apparently random electoral upheavals in CEE have a discernable, quantifiable shape and that the resulting patterns are fairly stable over time and across the region. The tendency of the same patterns to emerge and persist across the region—even in party systems once thought immune⁸—suggests that rapid political changes in CEE may benefit from a new metaphor. The self-sustaining, cyclical patterns we see here are less like

earthquakes than they are like hurricanes. Within the broad framework of the party system, the ever-rotating roster of newcomers has systemic characteristics in its own right and may usefully be understood as a subsystem.

Sartori's understanding of "systems" provides a useful starting point. His work defines them as "bounded, patterned and self-maintaining interdependencies"⁹ and sets two basic conditions: "(i) the system displays properties that do not belong to a separate consideration of its component elements and (ii) the system results from, and consists of, the patterned interactions of its component parts, thereby implying that such interactions provide the boundaries, or at least the boundedness, of the system."¹⁰ He also sees systems as nested, and refers to parties as constituting a "party subsystem" within the broader political system. While Sartori does not refer to subsystems *within* party systems, his conceptualization opens space for such entities, as long as they fulfill the same conditions: significant relational elements (which make the whole greater than the sum), patterns, and boundedness.

Within the literature on political parties, the notion of a "subsystem" has made occasional appearances to describe the regular interactions among groups of parties sharing a common programmatic (and fairly distinctive) ideology and voting base. Hanley uses it to describe the "semi-permanent constellation of parties" around the French Socialist Party that he refers to as the "plural left."¹¹ Strmiska introduces the concept to describe regard to parties in ethnoregional enclaves—Spain's Basque and Catalanian regions, Italy's Sardinia and South Tyrol, Montenegro in Serbia-dominated Yugoslavia—which compete primarily against one another and without much reference to parties in the rest of the country.¹² These usages fit neatly into Sartori's framework.

The use of "subsystem" to describe the new-and-newer party phenomenon of turnover requires a bit more explanation. Unlike the "plural left" or "ethnonational" subsystems, the new-and-newer parties do not always compete directly against one another, since new parties often do not emerge in the space until a previous incarnation is in severe decline. The patterns of competition thus occur not in party space but in party time, an intertemporal dimension that is more akin to the notion of "system" as used in discussions of "systems of succession" that establish patterns by which political offices change hands.¹³ The notion of a "new party subsystem" thus combines the boundedness of the "minority" subsystem discussed above—multiple parties sharing a common and distinct pool of ideas, voters, and elites—but the whole pattern becomes visible only with multiple observations that reveal the relationship between the decline of one party and the emergence of another as more than a series of unrelated parties. The use of the subsystem concept is particularly useful because the intertemporal change of names and personalities obscures continuity in the appeals and electorates of these parties. Treating the succession of similar but distinct parties as a *subsystem* is a way of capturing the elements that resemble elements of a single party without making the conceptual stretch of actually treating a succession of new parties as a single undifferentiated unit. It thus neatly fills the conceptual role of "system" by describing something that is neither a unitary actor nor a random collection.

Quantifying the New Party Subsystems

There are several good reasons for believing that new parties across the region exhibit specific patterns of interaction and continuity in voting base and programmatic position that fits the characteristics of a subsystem. Unfortunately, the main patterns of intra-subsystem flow lack conveniently comparable measurements that would allow comparison of these developments across the region. At the level of programmatic offerings, we are fortunate to have numerous surveys of experts, elite attitudes, and party programs, but these surveys consistently omit the programmatic positions most relevant for the subsystem: a focus on corruption.¹⁴ Its omission is understandable since it is only recently that observers have come to see the question of corruption as something more than a valence issue on which all parties agree, leaving voters to evaluate their sincerity and capacity. In CEE, the question of corruption more closely resembles a genuine, if sometimes vague dimension of programmatic competition in which the “uncorrupted but inexperienced” challenge the “tainted but experienced.” Without systematic measures, however, we can hope at best for qualitative assessments of party positions or rely on voters’ perceptions or the desires of party voters to give us a sense of parties’ position on this dimension. At the level of voters, we have numerous surveys of party preferences but almost no panel data that tracks how voters change their minds over time. Again the best we can find is indirect data: ecological analysis of vote flows in local communities, and retrospective survey questions in which respondents specify their current and past electoral choices, and even these are surprisingly rare.

Although limited, currently available evidence give strong support to the new-party-subsystem pattern in CEE countries:

- Bulgaria: Arguably the first country in the region to experience a full-scale new-party subsystem, Bulgaria experienced the sudden emergence of the new National Movement of Simeon II (NDSV) in 2001 followed by its collapse and the emergence eight years later of the newer Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB). Bochsler notes clear “voter shifts in 2009, when GERB is the big beneficiary of previous antiestablishment votes, winning a substantial part of previous Ataka votes [a radical right party that emerged in 2004] and of previous Simeon votes.”¹⁵
- Czech Republic: Both survey and electoral data show strong links between the “new” parties in 2010—TOP ‘09 and Public Affairs (VV)—and the “newer” parties in 2013—Action of Dissatisfied Voters (ANO) and Dawn of New Democracy (Úsvit). A significant majority of votes from new parties in 2010 either remained with those new parties, left the electorate, or flowed to the even newer parties of 2013, whereas a significant majority of “old” party voters remained within the “old” camp. It is significant that preelection opinion polls and ecological inference based on election results find almost the same results: patterns of voter outflow show about 65 percent of “old party” voters staying with old parties; while among

voters of 2010's new parties, only about 30 percent stayed while another 10–20 percent left the electorate and 30–40 percent opted for a newer party.¹⁶ Likewise, patterns of voter inflow show that newer parties took 30 percent of their voters from 2010's new parties and 15–30 percent from previous nonvoters.¹⁷

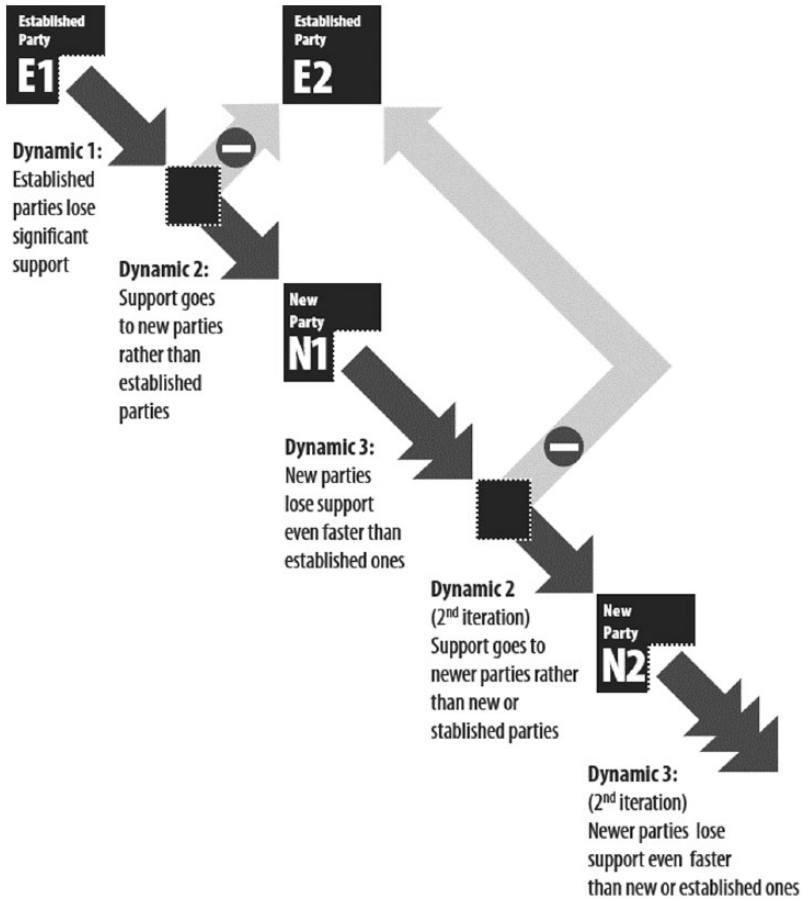
- Slovenia: Preliminary evidence from the 2014 election indicates that a disproportionate share of those who voted for new parties in 2011 subsequently voted for even newer parties (about 60 percent for the Party of Miro Cerar and about 10 percent for the United Left). Voter inflow shows the same patterns, with about half of the newer parties' votes coming from the parties that had been new in 2010.¹⁸
- Lithuania: Bochsler finds that in 2008 the new Party of National Resurrection (TPP) gained votes across the board both from strongholds of older parties and those of newer ones.¹⁹ When TPP folded, however, many of its voters did not return to the old parties but opted instead for yet another newcomer: Way of Courage (DK). Raimonte's analysis of retrospective survey data shows that a disproportionate share of voters from the new party voters opted for the newer party, and that the two-thirds of DK voters came from TPP (24 percent), from the ranks of nonvoters (34 percent) or from the ranks of other small parties (12 percent).²⁰

In addition to evidence from these high-volatility elections that reshaped entire party systems, there is also evidence of smaller, ongoing cycles of “new and newer” in which a series of “clean” parties with a particular programmatic orientation replaced otherwise similar parties with more unsavory histories. Even before the major shifts in 2010, the Czech Republic had already experienced a cycle of party replacement among parties occupying the moderately pro-market, social-liberal space: the Civic Democratic Alliance was supplanted by the Freedom Union, which was in turn supplanted by the Greens, which bequeathed many voters to the new parties of 2010.²¹ In Slovakia, retrospective analyses of voting show significant shifts in votes from the new party the Alliance of the New Citizen to the newer party Free Forum between 2002 and 2006 and again from the new party Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) to the newer party OLaNO between 2010 and 2012. Recent evidence suggests a similar flow from OLaNO to the newly created party Net (Siet').²²

Modeling the New Party Subsystem

As direct empirical evidence for the existence of voter flow in new party subsystems mounts, it is also possible to demonstrate that outcomes in CEE party competition are consistent with the results that a subsystem would produce. In the subsystem described above, disillusioned individual voters opt for new parties, become disillusioned, and then opt for still newer parties, but it is precisely these kinds of long-term individual-level tracking data that we lack. It is possible to reformulate this subsystem to describe party outcomes rather than individual behavior. The resulting party-level subsystem can be described with three sets of dynamics:

Figure 5
Flowchart of support flows according to new-party subsystem dynamics 1–3



1. Parties sometimes face the loss of significant numbers of supporters.
2. New parties are disproportionately likely to benefit from losses by more established parties.
3. The newer a party is, the more likely it is to suffer rapid, significant losses of support.

Figure 5 presents these three rules as a flow chart showing the cascade effect created when all three rules are in operation.

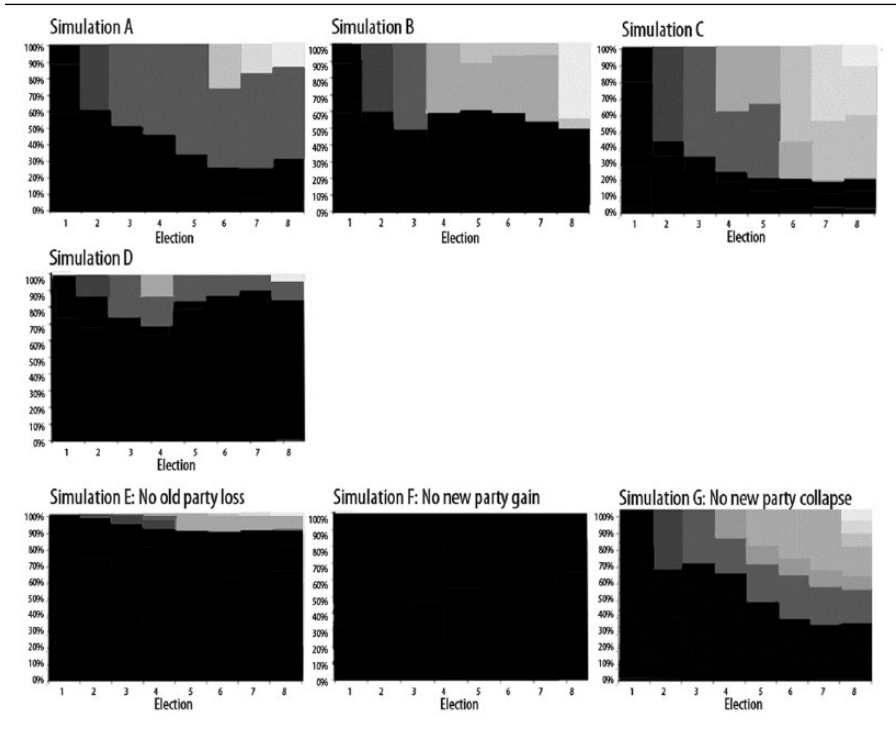
It is a simple matter to use these three dynamics to create a basic computer model of the emergence of a new-party subsystem that exists parallel to but distinct from

the established parties (which together could be conceived of as an “established party subsystem,” though its parties have little in common except their greater age and reluctance or inability to use the appeals based on corruption).²³ Simulations based on the three dynamics (with small amount of random chance shaping the initial relative sizes, and timing of the gains and losses, growth, and decline of individual parties) produces patterns indistinguishable from the empirical data above not only in terms of volatility but also party age and even distribution of party age. Not only do the four randomly chosen simulations in Figure 6 (panels A–D) follow the hypothesized pattern, but each one comes quite close to resembling a *particular* country in CEE. The dominance of third election parties in Simulation A (while some first election parties endure and new parties continue to replace one another) bears a striking resemblance to Poland and to Slovakia, as does Simulation B (though the major disruption of a new party in the eighth election bears closer resemblance to recent developments in Slovenia and the Czech Republic). The rapid decline of first and second election parties and subsequent periodic replacement of much of the party system in Simulation C resembles Latvia and Lithuania. Simulation D, produced with the exactly same dynamics, gives evidence of what can happen, as in the Romanian case, when the first-generation parties do not give way.

These results, furthermore, are highly dependent on *all* three dynamics working together. Any other combination produces different results. The final three panels in Figure 6 show the results (again the first of a series of random iterations) resulting from incomplete combinations of the same dynamics. Without the outflow from old parties of dynamic 1, Simulation E leaves voters static and produces no significant volatility (a model common to much of Western Europe during the postwar period).²⁴ Without the flow to new parties of dynamic 2, Simulation F produces a simple back-and-forth cycle between established parties E1 and E2. Without the new party fragility of dynamic 3, Simulation G produces a rapid crowding of the party system with parties of all ages rather than the sharp polarization of age distribution that is characteristic of actual cases in CEE.

Escaping the new party subsystem. The subsystem model above is useful not only because its outputs bear close resemblance to the existing party system dynamics but also because it gives us a more precise frame of reference for understanding alternative paths. The model describes party politics in Lithuania, Bulgaria, or the Czech Republic in 2013 better than in Estonia, Romania, or the Czech Republic in 2003. Such variation is to be expected. The point of the model is not that the dynamics are inevitable but that circumstances make them more likely than alternatives. These subsystems are shaped by actors’ choices, and if underlying incentive structures change (or if actors perceive them to have changed), the model’s paths may become less appealing, alternatives may prevail, and the cycle may slow or stop. The exceptions thus help to illuminate the contours and limits of the rule. The dynamics of the model frame the types of possible deviations.

Figure 6
Simulations of party system age distribution using new-party subsystem dynamics 1–3 (dynamics held constant, specific party birth, death, growth, and decline subject to randomization, first simulation results chosen, none excluded)



First, instead of losing significant support, some established parties may retain voter loyalty. Many parties demonstrate that ephemerality is not the destiny of all parties in CEE: nearly all parties in Romania, Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovenia until the early 2010s as well as segments of the Bulgarian left, the Hungarian center-right, and ethnic-minority communities endured. These parties did not always avoid defeat but they managed always to recover: in the garden of party systems, they are the hardy perennials that can endure political winters that short-lived annuals cannot survive. Preliminary evidence suggests that these parties' abilities to enhance their endurance depends on three strategies: investing in organization, becoming a standard bearer on a major issue divide of programmatic competition, and finding ways to balance benefits of a vibrant leader with mechanisms for shedding leaders who have become net liabilities. These strategies work,²⁵ but they have unappealingly high upfront costs, requiring significant expenditure and limiting party flexibility in

the short run. Nor do these choices bring a guarantee of survival. The collapse of some well-established parties after the 2008 economic crisis reinforce Roberts's view that electorates hold parties *hyperaccountable*,²⁶ and voter disappointment can become desertion when poor performance is accompanied by spectacular mistakes: a prime minister's taped secret admission that "We lied in the morning, noon and at night" (Hungary in 2006) or the corruption-related arrest of a top administrative aide who is also the prime minister's mistress (the Czech Republic in 2013).

The new-party subsystem may also be avoided if newly unattached voters do not flow en masse to new parties. Some of the barriers to new party success are well known in the literature: party rules, electoral system, and party funding rules²⁷ and have been in evidence in Estonia, Hungary, and Romania. Electoral systems (Hungary) and electoral law (Estonia and Romania) impose significant legal or psychological deterrents on those who would like to start new parties, but as the experience of Hungary suggests, these may simply delay new party creation rather than prevent it outright. It is also possible—though so far it seems surprisingly rare—that a string of failures by successive new parties may cause many in the subsystem electorate to move to inactive status and stay there until something can recapture their enthusiasm. The flow of voters to the new party subsystem may thereby leak away after three or four cycles, though there is nothing to prevent another subsystem from emerging in other segments of a country's political system where voters are less jaded by new-party failure.

Finally, new parties that do break through are not necessarily condemned to a short life as they can adopt the voter-maintenance strategies mentioned above. But the circumstances under which new parties emerge are often directly, even intrinsically, opposed to those strategies. The rapid startup period of many new parties only allows for rudimentary organizational structures, and electoral success exacerbates the problem since winners must divert their already small membership core away from local- and regional-party building toward filling new staff positions in parliament (and the problem is far worse for new parties participating in government).²⁸ Furthermore, the anticorruption appeals that propel new parties are difficult to sustain after electoral success. In an environment in which voters expect politicians to be corrupt, successful new parties may lose their anticorruption credentials (and again the problem is far worse for those who enter government). In addition, leader-driven parties tend to fall as quickly as they rise. The celebrity leadership that allows some new parties to jump rapidly into contention becomes a liability when party leaders prove corrupt, erratic, or ineffective and the infusions of outside cash that allow some new parties to emerge may make the new party visibly reliant on donors and therefore even more prone to corruption allegations. Finally, the young and uncommitted voters who are most available to new parties are also the same voters who are likely to change their mind before the next election.²⁹

In countries where the cycles have stopped, the shift can sometimes be traced to particular new parties that have made deliberate choices to eschew short-term

gains and invest in party organization and effective ideological positioning (away from short-lived anticorruption appeals). Some benefit, too, from circumstances that make the hard choices easier. Among the survivors are several parties that *failed* to make it into government on the first try, found themselves in opposition before subsequent elections (or even maneuvered themselves into an opposition role). It is therefore little surprise that few new parties—perhaps Smer in Slovakia is the best recent example—have made a successful transition from novelty to establishment.³⁰

We have sketched out here the characteristics of parties, party systems, and sub-party systems in CEE. Lack of space precludes a systematic analysis of why some parties and party systems show a greater or lesser capacity to escape the new party subsystem predicament. Further empirical research is needed, but our research highlights a number of propositions worthy of more detailed and thorough analysis linked to three key dimensions: appeals, organization, and leadership. First, the greater the preponderance of the parties in the subsystem to rely on ephemeral appeals linked to novelty and anticorruption, the less likely that the party can escape from the subsystem predicament. Moreover, this trend is only exacerbated if the parties trumpeting their novelty are thrust into government. Novelty does not last forever, and few parties prove to be whiter than white angels when accorded the trappings and temptations of power. Second, the less parties in the subsystem engage in party-building activities, particularly developing and nurturing local party branches, the more likely that the party subsystem will endure. Third, the more parties are dependent on their leaders and do not develop mechanisms to facilitate a (relatively) smooth passing of power without the entire edifice of the party crashing down, the harder it is to break out of the cycle of new party birth and death.

Extrapolation: The East and the Future of Party Systems

If the parties of Central and Eastern Europe seem always one step away from disaster, it may provide at least a little comfort to learn that the rapid changes in the region share an approximate shape and a trajectory. Coherent subsystems and cycles of change can guide the research strategies on parties in the region, suggesting more emphasis on party organization and leadership, voter flows between elections, and nonstandard issue dimensions. For those interested in changing the outcomes in the region, it can also provide guidance as to “what works.” From a party strategy perspective, that means organizational development, sustainable programmatic positions, mechanisms for ousting changing leaders, and staying out of government until absolutely necessary. From a policy perspective, the new party subsystem might be reduced with more effective regulation on the source and transparency of party funding and Estonian-style insistence on large numbers of founding members, but the efficacy of these strategies is highly questionable.

Another benefit of the new-party-subsystem model and the related measurements described above is that these approaches can integrate the study of parties in CEE into broader studies of the political changes worldwide. Central and Eastern Europe is not the only region where party systems display evidence of similar subsystems. Emerging democracies in Latin America,³¹ Asia,³² and Africa³³ have witnessed similar patterns as have more established democracies. The patterns in Greece and Italy bear striking similarity to the initial stages of the CEE pattern: significant new anti-corruption parties with celebrity leaders and rudimentary organization. Japan and Israel (and, some would argue, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Austria) have already seen the fading of an initial generation of newcomers and the emergence of “newer” parties.

The similarity of patterns across a wide range of democracies calls attention to underlying forces that may help to explain such a widespread (if still uneven) development. The seemingly inexorable underlying trend toward dealignment of voters from parties and the increasing role of celebrity combines in these cases with the growing ease of organizing electronically for one-off events. Major success by one new party creates the impression that others might succeed as well, and the resulting subculture of political innovation may generate a steady stream of “startup parties” that bear closer resemblance to their technology-industry counterparts than to traditional political parties. Together, these developments simultaneously make it easier to create a new party and harder to keep a party alive. Nor are these shifts unique to political parties. Naím’s *The End of Power* sees similarly accelerating cycles of disruption and replacement across the world in institutional realms ranging from the software firms to civic associations to religions.³⁴

The key to the variability of party system fortunes lies in the interaction between these broader contemporary forces of change and the strength of local institutions. The full effects of the forces producing party change may not be felt until events that significantly weaken an established party or significantly strengthen a new one. Where these shifts will happen—that is, which country and which political stream within a country—is not easily predictable since the process is not a linear one but proceeds in fits and starts because of thresholds in electoral law and in electoral psychology that differ significantly over time and across borders and the role of accidents and misjudgments. The global forces that push toward new-party subsystems have little impact where established parties are strong enough to restrict new party entry and avoid or recover from accidental damage. In such cases, an opening simply may not appear, or it may not be big enough to create a self-sustaining subsystem. But in systems with a major party collapse or the sudden intrusion of a new party—such as in the Netherlands, Greece, Israel, Japan, or Italy—the situation has not returned “to normal” and has experienced higher levels of subsequent volatility, particularly extra-system volatility, and key elements of the new-party subsystem model. Systems of older parties may have an advantage in holding off the forces of change, but they seem to have no particular advantage in sustaining *new* parties.

So is the world doomed to follow the Central and Eastern European party system into a period of high volatility and ever newer parties? Given the constant possibility of established-party failure and the fragility of new parties, we are likely to see a certain degree of churn in almost every party system over the coming decades. Whether this spells “doom” is a more complicated question. A certain degree of volatility can actually be a welcome relief in systems like those of Western Europe where the inertia has prevented some much needed change and there is no clear evidence that larger new-party subsystems fare worse in the short run: the disruption in Bulgaria caused by Simeon II does not seem to have made it worse off than the more stable Romanian system, and volatility in the 2000s did not set Slovakia behind the Czech Republic. More dangerous are the subtle losses inherent in new parties’ shorter time horizons and the difficulty of imposing accountability on a party that knows it might well disappear soon anyway. These problems are by no means insoluble, however, and citizens aware of the problem can try to find other mechanisms for ongoing accountability and the search for long-term policy solutions. One advantage of hurricanes over earthquakes is that you can see them coming.

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