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# Prime ministers and party governments in Central and Eastern Europe

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## ABSTRACT

This article is the introduction to a special issue on Prime Ministers (PMs) and party governments in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). It argues that the political survival of PMs in post-communist democracies depends on their interrelationships with other actors in three different arenas. The first arena encompasses the linkages between PMs and their parties. In this respect, being a party leader is a major power resource for PMs to retain their office even under critical circumstances. At the heart of the second arena is the PMs' relationship to other parliamentary parties. In this regard, the high fragmentation and fluidity of many post-communist party systems pose enormous challenges for PMs to secure constant parliamentary support. In the third arena, PMs are confronted with state presidents. Relatively strong CEE presidents, especially in semi-presidential systems, may use their constitutional powers to interfere in the political domain of PMs and thus jeopardise the stability of party governments. For each of these interrelationships, the article provides systematic evidence for eleven CEE democracies from 1990 to 2019 and situates the findings of the volume's contributions within a broader comparative perspective.

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## Introduction

Stable and effective party governments are essential for making parliamentary democracy work. In this regard, Prime Ministers (PMs) play a key role because their political leadership as chief executives has a decisive impact on the stability and effectiveness of their governments (King 1975; Strangio, 't Hart, and Walter 2013b). Therefore, the comparative study of party government usually takes the replacement of PM among the defining criteria for cabinet duration, on a par with changes in the partisan composition of government and general elections (King et al. 1990). Moreover, research on parliamentary democracies in Western countries has shown that the political significance of PMs has further increased over the last decades, given the ongoing internationalisation of politics, personalisation of political communication and weakening of cleavage structures (Poguntke and Webb 2005, 13–17).

In the parliamentary democracies of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), the situation seems to be more ambiguous. An early study on PMs in post-communist democracies contends that they have been significantly shorter in office than their Western

counterparts (Baylis 2007, 81). This impression is challenged in a more recent study, pointing to the growing prominence of PMs in some CEE countries, which seem to follow the path of “presidentialization” identified in Western Europe before (Hloušek 2015). In any case, a broader comparative inspection reveals that the office duration of PMs in CEE considerably differs across and within individual countries (Grotz and Weber 2017).

The reasons for this intriguing variation of prime-ministerial survival in post-communist democracies have not been sufficiently explored. Baylis (2007) attributes the “prime ministerial weakness” in CEE to various specificities of the post-communist context, such as party system instability, powerful state presidents, inexperience of political elites as well as policy constraints caused by economic transformation and Europeanization, but does not provide systematic empirical exploration of these arguments. Needless to say, there are several analyses on the stability of post-communist party governments (Grotz and Weber 2012; Tzelgov 2011; Schleiter and Morgan-Jones 2009). Likewise, quite a few studies have dealt with cabinet members and cabinet decision-making in CEE democracies (Blondel and Müller-Rommel 2001; Blondel, Müller-Rommel, and Malová 2007; Fetterschoss and Nikolenyi 2009). However, we know surprisingly little about why some PMs in CEE succeeded to stay significantly longer in chief executive office than others.

This Special Issue seeks to answer this question by qualitative case studies that are embedded in a common theoretical framework. The following contributions focus on selected PMs from different CEE countries and investigate their interactions with other key political players. In doing so, they shed light on how PMs succeeded to organise support of their allies, prevail in conflicts with their main political rivals and elaborate on the factors that explain their different survival in office.

This introductory article provides a systematic overview of prime-ministerial duration in the eleven EU member countries of CEE and situates the contributions of the Special Issue within a broader comparative perspective. We proceed with a theoretical framework which places PMs within their party governments, and elaborate on their interrelationships with other political actors in three arenas that are crucial for their survival in office: their own party, other parliamentary parties and the state president. Afterwards, we explore the patterns of prime-ministerial duration with respect to these arenas, by concentrating on individual and contextual factors that may strengthen or weaken the position of PMs. Finally, we reflect on the implications of the Special Issue’s findings and propose some avenues for future research.

## The position of prime ministers in party governments

Prime ministers occupy a central position in parliamentary democracies. As heads of government, they have the overall task of any chief executive: running the state affairs. In more concrete terms, they ought to manage a cabinet of ministers, provide stimulus and direction for domestic policies, react to unexpected events and secure the country’s interests at the international stage (Strangio, ‘t Hart, and Walter 2013a, 1–2). For this purpose, they usually have important constitutional powers and command extensive administrative capacities which put them in a publicly visible and politically strong position (Weller 2014).

However, the actual strength of PMs may considerably differ. This is not only because prime-ministerial powers may vary from constitution to constitution but also because PMs

critically depend on other political actors to remain in office and perform their tasks. Unlike chief executives in presidential systems which are popularly elected for a constitutionally fixed term, PMs head *parliamentary governments*. This means that they can be ousted by a vote of no-confidence at any time and thus need to achieve and maintain the support of the parliamentary majority to stay in office. Furthermore, parliamentary systems normally have dual executives with separate heads of state (presidents or constitutional monarchs). Since especially directly elected presidents may have significant constitutional powers, they can challenge the position of PMs and tip the balance of intra-executive relations to their advantage.

At the same time, political executives in parliamentary democracies are usually *party governments*, in which policy decisions are taken by elected office-holders who are recruited and held accountable by political parties in accordance with their electoral manifesto (Katz 1987; Mair 2008, 224). The partisan organisation of government has several implications for PMs to maintain their position. First, they are usually member of or closely affiliated to a party that brings them into office (Weller 1985; Helms 2002). Second, as single-party majorities in parliamentary democracies are the exception rather than the rule (Müller, Bergman, and Strøm 2008, 7–8), governments headed by PMs require the backing of other parliamentary parties, be it in the form of permanent majority coalitions or opposition parties that occasionally support minority cabinets. Third, most state presidents in parliamentary systems are also affiliated to a party because they are chosen either by parliamentary parties or in general elections whose campaigns are dominated by parties. If party affiliations of PMs and presidents do not concur, political conflicts may emerge between them, which considerably affect the PM's room for maneuver (Elgie 2008; Protsyk 2006). This might even happen if the president has to suspend her party membership after taking up office and thus becomes formally independent. Taken together, the actual strength of PMs to maintain their office results from their interrelationships with other actors in three political arenas: they have to secure the support of their *own party* as well as of a sufficient number of *other parliamentary parties* and prevail in possible conflicts with the *state president*.

Consequently, the survival in prime-ministerial office until the regular end of the parliamentary term can by no means be taken for granted but is a political achievement in its own right. Therefore, several comparative studies on PMs use their office duration as a proxy for their political "impact" (Müller and Philipp 1991, 137), "strength" or "effectiveness" (Baylis 2007, 83–84). Although we do not consider the longevity of PMs as the best possible indicator for their political strength, it provides an opportunity to separate between generally stronger and generally weaker PMs since we do not have a more refined comparative measurement at our disposal. Therefore, this Special Issue focuses on the office survival of PMs to explore their power relationships with other political actors in the post-communist context.

The degree to which PMs may secure their survival in office depends on a variety of factors. Most basically, one may distinguish between two groups of explanatory variables (Dowding 2013). On the one hand, the strength of a PM depends on the availability of *individual resources* which PM brings to the office (Helms 2019). In particular, this encompasses personality traits of the office-holders that shape their leadership style (Kaarbo 1997) but also features of their previous career that may provide them with leadership experience as well as political networks and allies to organise sufficient support (De

Winter 1991). On the other hand, the position of a PM is affected by the political environment in which she operates. These *contextual factors* especially include the institutional resources that empower PMs vis-à-vis the cabinet members, the parliament and the state president (Bergman et al. 2003, 113); attributes of parties and party systems that may facilitate or complicate the formation of cohesive and effective cabinets (Strøm and Nyblade 2007); and external constraints, such as economic downturns and other crisis events that lead to public unrest or mass demonstrations, which may put the PM and her party government under severe pressure (Boin et al. 2017).

Table 1 shows the ten longest-serving PMs in CEE from 1990 to 2019. It illustrates the wide variety of contexts under which these chief executives operated. The ten PMs are distributed across seven different countries. Some of them served as chief executive through the transition to democracy (Drnovšek and Mečiar), others during the 2008 economic crisis (Ansip, Tusk), while two were still in office at the end of the time period (Orbán and Borissov). The types of cabinets range from single-party minority governments (Borissov I and Sanader II) to four-party surplus coalitions (Drnovšek II and Dzurinda I). Only one cabinet (Fico II) conforms to the expectation that the strongest PMs lead

**Table 1.** Longest-serving PMs in 11 CEE countries (1990-2019).

PM	Country	Date in	Date out	PM duration <sup>a</sup>	Cabinet duration <sup>a</sup>	Number of cabinet parties	Cabinet type <sup>b</sup>
Viktor Orbán	Hungary	6 Jul 1998	21 Apr 2002	4222	1385	3	SUR
		29 May 2010	6 Apr 2014		1408	2	SUR
		10 May 2014	8 Apr 2018		1429	2	SUR
Robert Fico	Slovakia	4 Jul 2006	12 Jun 2010	3577	1439	3	MWC
		4 Apr 2012	6 Mar 2016		1432	1	MWC
		23 Mar 2016	16 Aug 2016		146	4	MWC
Janez Drnovšek	Slovenia	1 Sep 2016	15 Mar 2018	3459	560	3	MIN
		14 May 1992	6 Dec 1992		206	5	MIN
		25 Jan 1993	29 Mar 1994		428	4	SUR
		29 Mar 1994	31 Jan 1996		673	3	MWC
		31 Jan 1996	10 Nov 1996		284	2	MIN
		27 Feb 1997	8 Apr 2000		1136	3	MWC
		30 Nov 2000	2 Dec 2002		732	3	MWC
Andrus Ansip	Estonia	13 Apr 2005	4 Mar 2007	3193	690	3	MWC
		5 Apr 2007	21 May 2009		777	3	MWC
		4 Jun 2009	6 Mar 2011		640	2	MIN
		5 Apr 2011	26 Mar 2014		1086	2	MWC
Mikuláš Dzurinda	Slovakia	30 Oct 1998	21 Sep 2002	2633	1422	4	SUR
		16 Oct 2002	8 Feb 2006		1211	4	MWC
Donald Tusk	Poland	16 Nov 2007	9 Oct 2011	2462	1423	2	MWC
		18 Nov 2011	22 Sep 2014		1039	2	MWC
Vladimír Mečiar	Slovakia	24 Jun 1992	15 Mar 1994	2046	629	2	MWC
		13 Dec 1994	30 Oct 1998		1417	3	MWC
Bojko Borissov	Bulgaria	27 Jul 2009	21 Feb 2013	2045	1305	1	MIN
		7 Nov 2014	16 Nov 2016		740	3	MIN
Ivo Sanader	Croatia	23 Dec 2003	9 Feb 2006	2022	779	2	MIN
		9 Feb 2006	12 Jan 2008		702	1	MIN
		12 Jan 2008	6 Jul 2009		541	4	MWC
Janez Janša	Slovenia	3 Dec 2004	21 Sep 2008	1805	1388	4	MWC
		28 Jan 2012	20 Mar 2013		417	5	MWC

Source: Own calculations based on the dataset published in Grotz et al. (2021).

Notes: The countries included are Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. The time frame under consideration is between the first parliamentary elections after state independence (from 2000 in Croatia) up to the end of 2019. Only completed cabinets are included (PMs Orbán and Borissov were in office beyond the end of 2019).

<sup>a</sup>Office duration in days.

<sup>b</sup>MIN-minority; MWC-minimal winning coalition; SUR-surplus.

single-party majority cabinets. Even when cabinets are minimum-winning coalitions, they are rarely composed of two parties (Ansip IV, Tusk I and II, Mečiar I), but often include between three to five parties. There are also notable differences between cabinets of one and the same PMs. Among the PMs leading several cabinets, six were forced to leave office but returned after a period in opposition. Moreover, for those PMs who headed several consecutive cabinets there is no uniform trend towards longer or shorter cabinet duration over time.

In sum, long-serving PMs appeared across different and often difficult political contexts. This points to the relevance of PMs' individual characteristics *per se*, but also of the interplay between individual characteristics and contextual factors in strengthening or weakening their position in chief executive office (Elgie 2018). Therefore, the remainder of this article subsequently elaborates on the interrelationships of the PMs with their own party, other parliamentary parties and state presidents in the CEE context. Within this comparative framework, we place the ensuing articles of this Special Issue and highlight their main contributions to the extant literature.

### Prime ministers and their parties

In modern parliamentary democracies, political parties seek to monopolise the access to prime-ministerial office, which enables them to dominate the domestic policy agenda and gain visibility and popularity among voters. Hence, they are keen to appoint one of their own members as PM. Once this is achieved, parties need to ensure that the PM enacts their preferred policies and upholds their profile among the voters. For that purpose, they have developed various control mechanisms, including the removal of the PM as last resort (Samuels and Shugart 2010). However, given the benefits that parties receive from occupying PM office, they have a vital interest in backing their PMs, which rather stabilises the latter in office. We argue that the interrelationship between PMs and their own parties, and consequently the political strength of PMs, may depend on whether PM is a party leader or not. When PMs are also party leaders, this brings distinct advantages to both sides: visibility for parties and political support for PMs.

There are good reasons for parties to nominate their leaders as PM. Before becoming party leader, a politician has to undergo a rigorous pre-screening within the party and gain acceptance of its most powerful members and bodies by demonstrating her adherence to the party's policy line. Furthermore, PM parties prefer to nominate a candidate whom voters can most clearly associate with them. As the most recognisable party member, their leader is an appropriate choice (Grotz and Weber 2017, 230). Party leaders are also more likely to pursue nomination as PM, as they know that their parties have strong incentives to assist them in this office. Therefore, we expect that PMs in CEE tend to be party leaders.

PMs who are party leaders may also survive longer in office. As the electoral appeal of the PM party largely depends on government success, it usually has a great interest to hold its leader in the chief executive position. At the same time, it is easier for party-leader PMs to actively organise their support for government policy. In particular, party leaders need to maintain the policy profile of the party, aided by extensive institutional and informal prerogatives to ensure the support of the party's legislative wing (Carey 2007, 93; Müller 2000, 316).

**Table 2.** PM duration by party leadership in CEE democracies (1990-2019).

Country	Number of PMs by party leadership status				PM office duration			
	Party leader before <sup>a</sup>	Party leader during <sup>b</sup>	Not party leader <sup>c</sup>	Total	Party leader before <sup>a</sup>	Party leader during <sup>b</sup>	Not party leader <sup>c</sup>	Total
Bulgaria	6 (66.7)	1 (11.1)	2 (22.2)	9	1023	1305	516	942
Croatia	6 (85.7)	0 (0.0)	1 (14.3)	7	1002	-	146	879
Czech Republic	8 (88.9)	1 (11.1)	0 (0.0)	9	940	404	-	881
Estonia	9 (69.2)	3 (23.1)	1 (7.7)	13	825	589	122	717
Hungary	5 (50.0)	1 (10.0)	4 (40.0)	10	1386	1038	481	989
Latvia	5 (27.8)	3 (16.7)	10 (55.5)	18	356	634	502	483
Lithuania	5 (41.7)	2 (16.6)	5 (41.7)	12	986	954	516	785
Poland	5 (33.3)	2 (13.3)	8 (53.4)	15	850	911	445	642
Romania	5 (35.7)	1 (7.1)	8 (57.2)	14	1023	-	439	662
Slovakia	7 (77.8)	1 (11.1)	1 (11.1)	9	1179	272	459	999
Slovenia	9 (81.8)	2 (18.2)	0 (0.0)	11	901	392	-	809
Total	70 (55.1)	17 (13.4)	40 (31.5)	127	950	697	459	761

Source: see Table 1.

Notes: A PM term ends when (1) PM is replaced or (2) new elections occur. The data includes PMs since the first parliamentary elections after state independence (from 2000 in Croatia) up to the end of 2019. Only completed cabinets are included. Caretaker cabinets are excluded. Percentages are indicated in parentheses. Average office durations are given in days.

<sup>a</sup>The category includes PMs who were party leaders before assuming PM office.

<sup>b</sup>The category includes PMs who attained party leadership during their PM office.

<sup>c</sup>The category includes PM who never held party leadership position.

These expectations are clearly confirmed by a survey of all PMs in eleven CEE democracies from 1990 to 2019 (Table 2). Overall, more than a half (55.1%) of the PMs were party leaders before their accession to chief executive office. The significance of being a party leader in this regard is further underlined by the fact that several PMs assumed this office after becoming PMs (13.4%). At the same time, there is considerable variation at the country level. The general pattern is clearly observable in Croatia, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia, where nearly all PMs were party leaders. This stands in contrast to Romania, Latvia and Poland with a majority of non-party leader PMs. The reasons for the low proportion of party leaders may originate from specific circumstances under which PM assumes office<sup>1</sup>, but also from strategic decisions by incumbent party leaders against taking up PM office (Zuba 2020).

Table 2 also reveals that party-leader PMs in CEE have overall been longer in office compared to their counterparts who were not party leaders. PMs who became party leaders after assuming chief executive office also have a substantially longer tenure compared to non-party leaders. This pattern is most pronounced in Hungary, Croatia, Slovakia and Estonia, but does not uniformly apply to all countries. In Latvia, for instance, PMs without party leadership have not only been most frequent but also survived longer in

office than the others. Nevertheless, becoming party leader while in office emerges as the best survival strategy for Latvian PMs.

Several contributions to this Special Issue reflect on the relevance of holding the top party office for prime-ministerial survival. They argue that being a party leader not only enables PMs to secure support of their own parties, but also provides advantages in coping with other political actors. More specifically, Alenka Krašovec and Dario Nikić-Čakar explore the conditions under which Croatian and Slovenian PMs secure their survival when genuinely new parties (GNPs) are included in their coalition governments. The challenge is even greater when PMs themselves originate from GNPs, as in the case of Slovenian PMs Alenka Bratušek and Miro Cerar. The contribution by Maria Spirova, Radostina Sharenkova-Toshkova and Romyana Kolarova additionally considers the case of the Bulgarian PM Borissov who founded his own party.

As the undisputed leaders of their parties, Cerar and Borissov easily ensured their backing. In contrast, despite being the leader of Positive Slovenia, Bratušek failed to resist pressures of the charismatic party founder Zoran Janković, which led to the premature termination of her prime-ministerial office. Additionally, a solid backing from their parties allowed Cerar as well as the Croatian PM Andrej Plenković to successfully employ various survival strategies at the coalition and cabinet levels when challenged by the GNPs in their governments.

### Prime ministers and other parliamentary parties

Beyond their own party, PMs also rely on other parliamentary parties that have joined their government as coalition partners. Therefore, the break-up of such government coalition might imply the end of the PM term and vice versa. While a high congruence between prime-ministerial and party-government survival seems to be plausible, there are also two alternative possibilities. On the one hand, government parties may withdraw their support in a PM and replace her without changing the partisan composition of government or calling early elections. On the other hand, a PM may reshuffle her party government and thus succeed to survive in office. For instance, she might replace an outgoing party with another one to preserve the parliamentary majority or simply continue by leading a minority government if the departure of a party entails losing the majority status. These scenarios contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between PMs and their government parties. The success of a PM to outlive her party government demonstrates her ability to maintain office even in critical circumstances. The continuity of a party government rather points to the notable weakness of PMs, who not only lost the backing from other parliamentary parties but also from their own party.

The expectation of congruent durations of PMs and their party governments is overall confirmed at the regional level. As Table 3 shows, there have been only slightly more party governments than PMs in CEE, and accordingly, PMs have tended to stay in office a little longer compared to the partisan composition of their cabinets. However, the country-level analysis reveals considerable variation. In Bulgaria, Poland and Slovakia the relative duration of PMs and party governments broadly conform to the congruity observed at the regional level. In the Czech Republic and Hungary, however, party governments have been more durable than PMs while the remaining countries tend to show the



**Table 3.** Duration of PMs, party governments and cabinets in CEE democracies (1990-2019).

Country	Prime ministers		Party governments		Cabinets	
	N	Duration	N	Duration	N	Duration
Bulgaria	9	941	8	983	9	941
Croatia	7	879	10	616	11	560
Czech Republic	9	880	8	991	10	792
Estonia	13	717	15	622	16	583
Hungary	10	989	8	1236	11	899
Latvia	18	483	21	413	23	377
Lithuania	12	785	12	785	15	628
Poland	15	642	13	741	18	535
Romania	14	662	18	500	24	386
Slovakia	9	999	9	936	10	899
Slovenia	11	809	15	593	15	593
Total	127	761	137	695	162	597

Source: see Table 1.

Notes: A PM term ends when the PM is replaced or new elections occur. A party government is terminated when the party composition of cabinet changes or new elections occur. Cabinet ends with PM replacement, change of party composition, or new elections. The data includes PMs since the first parliamentary elections after state independence (from 2000 in Croatia) up to the end of 2019. Only completed cabinets are included. Caretaker cabinets are excluded. Average office durations are given in days.

reversed image. This particularly applies to Croatia and Slovenia where some PMs have displayed outstanding ability to reshuffle their party governments and remain in office. A considerable success in this respect was also achieved by Estonian and Romanian PMs.

While these distinct patterns of prime-ministerial and party-government duration are clearly visible in CEE countries, the extant literature has not elaborated on the conditions under which they occur. As a first step towards such an understanding, we explore selected factors which might critically affect the stability of PMs and their party governments in post-communist democracies. In general, the standard attributes for explaining government stability (Müller, Bergman, and Strøm 2008, 20–23; Grofman and van Roozendaal 1997) may also be suitable for exploring the office survival of PMs. In the following, we concentrate on two attributes of party governments that may be considered particularly relevant in the CEE context.

The first attribute undermining the stability of party governments is their *minority status*. Minority governments entail continuous bargaining with opposition parties, spearheaded by PMs as their heads. Therefore, the minority status of a cabinet highlights the relevance of the wider parliamentary constellation beyond government parties. In particular, extremist parties usually refuse to enter government or are permanently excluded from the coalition formation process since they stand in fundamental opposition to parliamentary democracy and seek to bring down any party government. Thus, strong extremist parties in parliament may critically affect the survival of minority cabinets and of their PMs (Warwick 1994, 63). Other opposition parties may be willing to cooperate with the government to varying degrees, by entering rather stable agreements with minority governments or supporting them on an ad hoc basis. The lack of credible commitment by opposition parties may motivate these parties to negotiate alternative coalitions, thus frustrating the policy agenda of PMs and possibly ousting them from office (Somertopcu and Williams 2008, 317).

Minority governments have been a frequent phenomenon in several CEE countries (Keudel-Kaiser 2016). The Hungarian case study in this Special Issue demonstrates that

the repercussions of minority governments for prime-ministerial strength may be mitigated through ideological moderation. Daniel Kovarek compares the political success of PMs who led the only two minority governments in post-communist Hungary: Ferenc Gyurcsány (2008-2009) and Gordon Bajnai (2009-2010). While the two MSZP minority cabinets were supported by the same party (SZDSZ) and they were consecutive, Bajnai was considerably more successful in attaining the support of SZDSZ for his legislative agenda compared to his predecessor. Daniel Kovarek links the relative success of Bajnai to his strategy of ideological moderation. Gyurcsány, on the other hand, continued to pursue highly partisan political agenda, which was rejected by the key parliamentary supporting party.

Second, the involvement of *genuinely new parties* in governments has largely escaped the attention of Western literature on coalition governance, but there are good reasons to assume that GNPs may negatively influence the stability of PMs and party governments in CEE. By definition, these parties have no governing experience and often lack a clear ideological profile, which makes coalition negotiations more unpredictable and prone to failure (Grotz and Weber 2016, 452). Nevertheless, GNPs are a recurring feature of CEE party systems and frequently participate in governments of the region (Tavits 2008, 114). In particular, Croatia and Slovenia have experienced a recent surge of GNPs in parliaments and governments. As Alenka Krašovec and Dario Nikić-Čakar argue, the government participation of these parties has placed considerable strain on the survival of both PMs and their party governments. An obvious case is the Croatian GNP Most, which failed to formulate a clear policy direction beyond the continuous criticism of proposals coming from its coalition partner HDZ. Similarly, Miro Cerar's party SMC owed its electoral success to the personality of its leader, but otherwise lacked a clear policy agenda and experienced personnel. In response to these challenges, Slovenian and Croatian PMs attempted to ensure their survival through various strategies. Their success critically depended on the individual power resources of PMs, as in the case of Cerar in Slovenia who skillfully combined formal and informal mechanisms of cabinet conflict management, or Plenković in Croatia who succeeded to remove the rebellious GNP from his government.

The Bulgarian PM Boyko Borissov (2009-2013; 2014-2017) experienced exceptionally difficult contextual conditions, coming from a GNP and heading a minority government during both of his completed terms. Against the unfavourable odds, he became the longest-serving Bulgarian PM. The contribution by Maria Spirova, Radostina Sharenkova-Toshkova and Romyana Kolarova attributes the survival of Borissov to the combination of the early organisational consolidation of his party GERB and the building of a personal following, which pre-empted the shortage of experienced and loyal cadre for executive offices. Beyond these more conventional procedures, the authors single out strategic PM resignations, by which Borissov successfully deflected the responsibility of his government for poor economic conditions, and removed problematic coalition partners.

### Prime ministers and state presidents

Parliamentary democracies are characterised by dual executives, and in CEE in particular, PMs coexist with presidents, which are considerably involved in politics (Protsyk 2006). Besides the popular mandate and the significant powers that most heads of state in

the region enjoy, highly volatile party systems and frequent government crises gave the impression of presidents as the beacons of political stability in the post-communist context. At the same time, the weakness of PMs in CEE may be partially attributed to powerful presidents, who staged serious conflicts with PMs and even forced some of them out of office (Baylis 2007, 89).

The extent to which presidents are likely to mount a challenge on the PMs depends on their constitutional powers (Bucur and Cheibub 2017; Schleiter and Morgan-Jones 2009). Besides commanding a popular mandate, some presidents are granted considerable powers in relation to cabinet formation and within the legislative process (Shugart and Carey 1992). Based on such institutional equipment, presidents may impose their own political agenda upon the government.

Presidents are especially motivated to interfere in the work of PMs when they are affiliated to an opposition party. In many democracies, it has become common practice that presidential candidates are party members or at least receive campaign assistance from parties, which compels them to act in partisan manner once they win the presidency (Savage 2018). The occurrence of “cohabitation” between presidents and PMs, where the president is affiliated to a party not included in the cabinet (Elgie 2010, 29), may undermine the legislative agenda of the acting party government as well as its political survival. On the other hand, when the president is affiliated to the PM party or another party of the government coalition, PMs may count on the support of an important ally. Therefore, political conflicts between PMs and presidents under cohabitation might be reflected in a shorter office duration of PMs, compared to cases in which the intra-executive partisan constellation is congruent. Since powerful “hostile” presidents may seriously affect the position of PM, we expect that cohabitation shortens prime-ministerial duration particularly when presidents command substantial constitutional powers.

Table 4 shows the patterns of presidential powers and their partisan congruence with PMs in the eleven CEE democracies, as well as the average prime-ministerial duration under the different constellations. Overall, the constitutional powers of state presidents reported in the third column of Table 4 (Bairrett 2015; Andrews and Bairrett 2019) are not systematically linked to prime-ministerial duration. Polish and Romanian PMs have relatively short office durations, which may be linked to the substantial presidential powers in these countries. However, Latvian PMs held office for an average of only 483 days, despite constitutionally weak presidents. Other outliers are the PMs in Hungary, Croatia and Slovakia who recorded an above-average longevity while serving alongside considerably powerful presidents.

Turning to the patterns of partisan congruence, a plurality of PMs (40.2%) served under presidents from the same party or another government party, while almost a third experienced a cohabitation. There is also a considerable number of PMs who governed under independent presidents. Interestingly, the frequency of independent presidents seems not to be systematically related to their election mode, as relevant cases have frequently appeared not only in Lithuania and Slovenia (direct elections) but also in Latvia and Hungary (indirect elections). At large, PMs in CEE are shorter in office under cohabitation than under congruent intra-executive constellations. However, this overall difference is not as pronounced as expected. In fact, prime-ministerial duration is shortest when presidents are not affiliated to any party, which does not fit the conventional wisdom about partisan presidents and their relations with PMs.

**Table 4.** PM duration by PM-president partisanship congruence in CEE democracies (1990-2019)

Country	Direct election <sup>a</sup>	Presidential powers	Power index <sup>b</sup>	PMs by PM-president partisanship congruence			PM duration by partisanship congruence			Total
				Congruent <sup>c</sup>	Cohabitation	Independent	Congruent <sup>c</sup>	Cohabitation	Independent	
Poland	Y		13.0	9 (60.0)	6 (40.0)	0 (0.0)	616	683	-	642
Romania	Y		13.0	8 (57.2)	5 (35.7)	1 (7.1)	834	442	391	662
Hungary	N		12.6	3 (30.0)	3 (30.0)	4 (40.0)	1415	948	700	989
Croatia	Y		11.0	5 (57.1)	3 (42.9)	0 (0.0)	813	968	-	879
Lithuania	Y		11.0	2 (16.7)	0 (0.0)	10 (83.3)	663	-	809	785
Slovakia	Y		9.3	3 (33.3)	5 (55.6)	1 (11.1)	1156	963	706	999
Estonia	N		9.0	7 (53.9)	6 (46.1)	0 (0.0)	653	792	-	717
Bulgaria	Y		8.0	4 (44.4)	4 (44.4)	1 (11.1)	1001	965	611	942
Czech Republic	N		6.0	2 (22.2)	4 (44.5)	3 (33.3)	974	698	1062	881
Latvia	N		6.0	6 (33.3)	3 (16.7)	9 (50.0)	508	476	469	483
Slovenia	Y		5.0	3 (27.3)	1 (9.1)	7 (63.6)	810	1388	725	809
Total	-		9.4	51 (40.2)	40 (31.5)	36 (28.3)	794	777	697	761

Source: see Table 1.

Notes: A PM term ends when (1) PM is replaced or (2) new elections occur. The data includes PMs since the first parliamentary elections after state independence (from 2000 in Croatia) up to the end of 2019. Only completed cabinets are included. Caretaker cabinets are excluded. Percentages are indicated in parentheses. Average office durations are given in days.

<sup>a</sup>In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the state president was elected by parliament until 2009 and 1999 respectively.

<sup>b</sup>The index is the sum of scores for legislative and non-legislative presidential powers (Andrews and Bairrett 2019).

<sup>c</sup>The partisanship of PM and president is congruent if president is (was until elected) a member of PM party or other coalition party. Independent means that the president has no formal party affiliation.

At the country-level, there seems to be more variation between the three categories. This variation might be due to different degrees of presidential powers, as opposition-affiliated presidents are more likely to undermine the survival of PMs the more powerful they are. Among the six countries with the most powerful presidents, three have a significantly higher office duration of PMs who did not serve under presidents from opposition parties (Romania, Hungary and Slovakia), which partially corroborates the theoretical expectation. In Poland, however, the difference in PM duration between congruent and non-congruent constellation is quite small although the country has the most powerful presidency in the region. Another exceptional case is Lithuania, where independent presidents seem to be more favourable for PM survival than presidents affiliated to government parties. Croatian PMs under cohabitation also have a small advantage over those in congruent constellation. This might be partially attributed to the exclusion of Plenković II cabinet from calculation (ended in May 2020), which lasted for nearly the complete legislative term in parallel to president Grabar-Kitarović who was supported by HDZ.

To get a more nuanced understanding of the relationships between PMs and state presidents and their impact on PM survival, two contributions to the Special Issue deal with the cases of Lithuania and Romania. As mentioned above, both countries are characterised by directly elected and constitutionally powerful state presidents. Lithuania is an outstanding case as nine out of eleven PMs served under independent presidents. The contribution by Lukas Pukelis and Mažvydas Jastramskis therefore looks beyond party congruence, exploring the mechanisms by which independent presidents influence the political discretion of PMs in the field of ministerial selection. The authors find that such attempts by presidents are more likely when PMs have weak parliamentary support and in the period after presidential elections. On the other hand, all Romanian presidents were affiliated to political parties, leading to more pronounced effects of partisan (in)congruence between president and PM on the survival of the latter. The contribution by Laurențiu Ștefan confirms the overall pattern reported in [Table 4](#). When Romanian presidents are influential figures in one of the governing parties, they exert control over PMs through two mechanisms. On the one hand, they may use their authority to facilitate coalition formation and management, thus assisting PMs in securing the support of parliamentary majority. On the other hand, presidents commanding government parties may force PMs to leave office, despite not having the formal prerogative of cabinet dissolution.

## Conclusion

While Prime Ministers enjoy substantial powers to accomplish their diverse tasks, their political survival depends on their interrelationship with three key actors: their own parties, other parliamentary parties and state presidents. Exploring the overall patterns of prime-ministerial duration in eleven CEE countries, this article attempted to provide a systematic overview of relevant conditions in these arenas. The relationship between PMs and their own parties is more stable when PMs are party leaders. This has been the case for nearly two-thirds of PMs in CEE since 1990, and these PMs have had considerably longer office duration than other PMs. Moreover, some PMs managed to outlive their original party governments, whereas others were replaced

while their party governments continued. Finally, the position of PMs is dependent on the partisan congruence between presidents and parliamentary majorities, particularly if the former command considerable constitutional powers. Arguably, the way these conditions affect the office survival of individual PMs often seems peculiar to contextual circumstances, which invites for in-depth case studies, like those included in this Special Issue.

Indeed, the detailed analysis of individual cases reveals a more complex picture, with important implications for our understanding of prime-ministerial survival in post-communist democracies. Several contributions highlight that PMs do not depend exclusively on a single arena, but rather on the constellation of actors in multiple arenas. Most interestingly, the weakness of PMs in a single arena may be compensated by their strong position within another arena. For example, several Romanian PMs successfully resisted the pressure of opposition-affiliated presidents by relying on the backing of their own party or the support of their parliamentary allies. Another common thread running through most contributions is the importance of individual skills of PMs in maintaining their office. Most interestingly, certain PMs survived under exceptionally difficult conditions. A good example is the Bulgarian PM Borissov, who successfully ensured his survival in office despite leading a minority cabinet consisting of predominantly new parties, including his own party GERB. This observation implies that studies of PMs and their interactions within the three arenas should more carefully consider their individual predispositions, and explore them in conjunction with contextual factors.

Our article provides external validation of office duration as a proxy for exploring prime-ministerial strength in comparative perspective, showing that PMs in CEE remained longer or shorter in office dependent on the given conditions in the three major arenas. However, one might also define the political strength of PMs in a more substantive way, focusing on the tasks they ought to perform during their term. Apart from their survival skills and support of own parties and parliamentary majority keep them in office, PMs also need to provide direction for domestic policy, manage their cabinets, secure national interests abroad, as well as cope with exogenous crises (Strangio, 't Hart, and Walter 2013b; 't Hart and Schelfhout 2016; Grotz et al. 2021). The findings of this Special Issue might also provide guidance in theorising the relevant contextual and individual factors, which might separately or interactively affect the performance of PMs in CEE democracies.

## Note

1. For example, Grotz and Weber (2017) find that PMs are less likely to be party leaders in replacement cabinets, compared to post-electoral cabinets.

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