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Party Competition in Postcommunist Europe

The Great Electoral Lottery

Abby Innes

Few institutional developments are more critical to democratic consolidation in eastern Europe than the development of representative parties that compete accurately and intently over the issues of the day. Where parties fail, it will hardly matter how efficient other institutions of state may have become. The new systems will lack legitimacy and be vulnerable to instability and takeover. If the most telling indicator of party system stabilization is the absence of new parties, however, then eastern European party systems without exception remain unstable. In Poland, Hungary, the Czech and Slovak Republics, Bulgaria, and Romania new parties, new coalitions, party mergers, and party makeovers have caused a significant shift in party identity over the last few years. Voter volatility in many cases is not only extremely high but, after more than four elections, rising.[1] If this instability is taken to be merely superficial, and stabilization in allegiance is instead sought in ideological blocs (thus investigating deep volatility), then there is a peculiarly postcommunist measurement problem. The conventional measurement of voter volatility by bloc across the left-right divide can not be applied easily in a region where mainstream parties have been constrained to endorse free market reforms and to minimize redistribution. Dismantling the planned economy, ending economic stagnation, and preparing for membership in the European Union have tended not so much to provoke consistent left-right competition as to prove valence issues, "issues on which all parties declare the same objective but dispute each other's competence in achieving the desired policy."[2]

With the left-right division in economic terms excluded, it becomes extremely difficult to find a measure of economic attitudes that coheres well with anything approaching party blocs. The solution for many analysts has been to create new typologies and to try to monitor shifting voter support between their assigned blocs accordingly. However, even these efforts have run into measurement problems since over the last ten years the major parties have been either sufficiently vague in their policy statements or have changed their character enough to make the monitoring of voter shifts by bloc as an indicator of system stability, however that bloc is labeled, questionable.

The critical question arising from this situation is how political parties can compete while compelled to remain essentially in favor of market liberalization when in govern-

ment. Continued party system instability is in fact a direct consequence of the type of party competition emerging in eastern Europe, indeed, of a dominant type of electoral strategy. This dominant strategy is a rational response to the phenomenal number of policy constraints resulting from the transition from Communism, many of which are externally dictated. Eastern European parties have had, in effect, to satisfy two constituencies, one internal, the other external, with the very existence of the latter inhibiting the development of the former.

In claiming the existence of a dominant competitive strategy, this article focuses only on those parties that have proved successful in post-1989 electoral politics, that is, on parties and coalitions that have been in government after 1989. The party systems of Poland, Hungary, the Czech and Slovak Republics, Bulgaria, and Romania have been selected on the principle of most similar systems since they all experienced a Soviet-type-system for forty years and after 1989 developed parliamentary systems (in contrast to states of the former USSR).[3] However, Bulgaria and Romania both experienced more ambiguous transfers of power during the revolutions of 1989, which added an additional layer of disadvantage in their development of pluralistic party systems. Thus, they are treated more briefly.

This article seeks to explain two things: the origins and character of successful electoral strategies in eastern Europe after 1989 and the reasons why different countries have developed different constellations of political parties. The explanatory variable that accounts for a dominant electoral strategy in the region is the dominance of valence issues in party competition, which fundamentally constrained politics during the transition. The explanatory variable that accounts for different constellations of party competition in different countries is state-society relations under Communism, the different degrees of success with which the Communist systems suppressed nonparty and antiparty political and social organization. The level of political pluralism that evolved within the Communist regime is the main factor that determined who was available to play the dominant strategy after 1989. Subsequently, the prospects of economic growth and estimates of the pain threshold of the electorate for reforms have further determined what credible forms this dominant electoral strategy may take.

Following Kitschelt, Mansfeldova, Markowski, and Toka, this article characterizes Communist regimes as having taken three forms: patrimonial Communism (Romania, Bulgaria), national-accommodative Communism (Hungary and Poland), and bureaucratic-authoritarian Communism (Czechoslovakia).[4] In opposition to them, however, it argues that the legacies of patrimonial and bureaucratic-authoritarian Communist regimes have proven similarly dysfunctional for the creation of programmatic competition after 1989, since the political elites emerging from both regime types were scarcely embedded in anything resembling identifiable social constituencies. The legacy of national-accommodative Communism, by contrast, has proven conducive to programmatic competition because of the relatively socially embedded nature of Hungary and Poland's political personnel. The significant difference between patrimonial and bureau-

cratic-authoritarian regimes lies not so much in the different character of the political elites available after 1989—dissidents were equally rare, fragmented, and socially isolated in Bulgaria, Romania, and Czechoslovakia—as in the levels of economic development in these countries and in the reasonable prospects for rapid success in transition in economic terms.[5] Thus, it has made sense for a former Romanian *apparatchik* to sell himself as a populist, whereas a former Czech *apparatchik* could sell himself as a reformist technocrat. In neither case, however, have political elites, even avowedly technocratic elites, dared to impose the true social costs of a rapid and comprehensive transition.

Trends in party competition in eastern Europe will be surveyed using western models of party competition heuristically and drawing from already rich theoretical debate and empirical data.[6] The impression of stabilization, convergence with western patterns of programmatic competition, and growing partisan identification given by rational choice and political-sociological approaches to eastern European party development to date has been misleading. Even in those two countries that have shown an indisputable shift toward programmatic competition, Poland and Hungary, the systems remain peculiarly vulnerable. The reasons become clear once the political challenges of postcommunist reform are factored back into the analysis. Once political constraints are taken into account, it is apparent that the pressures of dismantling the Communist system have left little space for substantive competition over policy options in major areas such as the economy. Political parties in government in this region have been harnessed to an agenda of necessary reforms yet when running for election must still be seen to offer electoral alternatives. To do so convincingly, politicians in the region emphasize themselves and their own credible skills, and parties have learned how to compete over operating styles rather than programmatic substance. The political party system thus offers electoral accountability but not policy accountability, since the electoral system is capable of getting rid of parties but not of shaping policies in critical areas of government. Programmatic competition is understood here as a competition where "parties announce identifiable and differing commitments to realise binding political decisions and collective goods they intend to deliver to society, were their representatives elected to political office."[7]

The Catch-All Party and the Cartel Party in Western Europe

Otto Kirchheimer concluded in the 1960s that the era of the mass integration party was passing. Consequently, western European party systems were faced with the rise of what he termed "catch-all parties."[8] "The mass integration party," he argued, "the product of an age with harder class lines and more sharply protruding denominational structures, is transforming itself into a catch-all 'people' party. Abandoning attempts at the intellectual and moral encadrement of the masses, it is turning more fully to the elec-

toral scene," exchanging "effectiveness in depth for a wider audience and more immediate electoral success."[9] In western Europe the shift was not to pure pragmatism or populism but away from strict ideological goals toward more tactically modulated principles, postmodern issues, and a greater concentration upon policies that would provoke minimum resistance in the community. Kirchheimer presented the German CDU and SPD as classic catch-all parties that had effectively diluted their original ideologies in order to widen their voter base.

While party systems in western Europe have continued to develop beyond the catch-all model (not least to the cartel model), the original analysis remains suggestive when applied to post-1989 eastern Europe.[10] In western Europe the socioeconomic changes and social movements of the 1960s precipitated the move to catch-all party strategies. In Communist eastern Europe, in contrast, the key development through the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s was ideological stagnation, and in Bulgaria, Romania, and postinvasion Czechoslovakia the suppression of political identity beyond Communist orthodoxy. In revolutionary eastern Europe, and in these most repressive states in particular, would-be party politicians woke up after 1989 to the problem of finding constituencies and issues on which to compete. In these circumstances, success attended those seeking the conditional support of the electorate and competing on the open market rather than attempting to develop and narrow that market; in other words, instant catch-all parties emerged as the optimal strategy.

Instant Catch-All Parties in Postcommunist Europe

One of the defining features of the eastern European transition in its earliest years was the inability of political strategists to know the nature and strength of political cultural continuity after Communism.[11] Political strategists coming out of the most repressive regimes did not know which constituencies could now be mobilized in terms of partisan political identities, nor did they know what the electorate would tolerate by way of hardship. The first elections in each of these states were more like plebiscites on the basic issue of being for change and against Communism than anything resembling a multidimensional party competition. (Only Hungary had a constellation of political parties in 2001 resembling that in 1990, but, although Hungarian parties retained consistent names, they changed their political orientations significantly.) In these plebiscitary first elections the broad-based anticommunist coalition movements, with dissident groups at their core, performed most successfully, with the partial exceptions of Romania, where the Romanian National Front was quickly dominated by the Illiescu faction, still affiliated to many of the values of Communism, and Bulgaria, where a revamped Bulgarian Socialist Party held onto power against a still diffuse opposition. In all cases, though, the most credible agents of change were elected.[12]

However, how these changes look in practice and how much hardship the electorate would stand could still only be guessed in 1990 and 1991. It is important to recall that the ostensibly monolithic anticommunist civic movements were essentially only loosely knit networks and coalitions, but they were more commonly collections of groups whose diversity of opinion was masked by their common rejection of Communism. As broad coalitions they carried the most general agendas into these elections: democratization, marketization, the return to Europe, freedom, and prosperity. Not only were these movements full of only vaguely categorized factions, but even within the factions there was little by way of disciplined allegiance. (In the case of dissident circles there was considerable suspicion surrounding the idea of party discipline as such, deriving from the dissident philosophy of antipolitics.) Once the decision to become a party had been made, therefore, elites from within these movements were free to formulate a party structure and party type unconstrained by any institutional legacies. Moreover, by emerging in parliament these new parties were instantly and nationally known as electoral players, and their new strategic task was to maximize their vote to stay in parliament.

In a critical step in party development the instant catch-all parties after 1989 on the whole organized themselves by forming parliamentary groups from within already elected monolithic parliamentary civic blocs: Solidarity in Poland, the Czech Civic Forum and the Slovak Public against Violence in Czechoslovakia, the Union of Democratic Forces in Bulgaria, and the usurped National Salvation Front in Romania. Models of party system development that relied upon arguments of economic rationality and depicted eastern European politics as emerging from or developing along with the tangible pocketbook logic of the electorate were misleading about the institutional ordering of political life. Most important, mainstream eastern European politics proved more essentially promarket in its practice, if not in its promises, than many had anticipated. Through 1993 and 1994 even the postsocialist camps revealed their promarket colors when elected to government in both Poland and Hungary. Party competition, therefore, did not address the distribution of economic resources.

Parties formulated their identities and political strategies by niche marketing within parliament in a necessarily top-down and highly abstract intellectual process. As the anticommunist (and Communist) fronts disintegrated, new political elites had to define their own political space in relation to how other competing elites defined it, primarily in relation to the first government parties, rather than as a response to any emerging cleavages or new disputes within postcommunist society (apart from the question of the status of the Communists, the inescapable controversy in the aftermath of revolution). It was hardly surprising that those in government set the agenda: only those parties had to face up to the full range of problems confronting the state and to clarify their intentions in policy. As soon as new governments were established, however, the true constraints under which they were going to have to operate became apparent. After 1989 the stan-

dards for economic reform were clear. Half-measures, as attempted in Hungary and Poland in the last decades of Communism and in Czechoslovakia in the very last years, had failed, and liberalization and full restructuring could no longer be avoided anywhere if productivity was to improve and sustainable growth to return. This view was emphatically endorsed by western advice. Only a few years later the standards for membership in the European Union were presented as a *fait accompli*, as policies around which there was little room for competition. Economic growth and membership in the EU were seen not simply as public goods but as public necessities. The issues implicit in marketization and harmonization with European Union norms duly emerged as valence issues.

In postcommunist Europe political entrepreneurs had little choice but to attempt reforms because elections had become free and incumbents would be evicted from office if conditions were seen to deteriorate. Dismantling the command economy has been incredibly difficult to manage politically, however. Politicians faced a shrinking public budget combined with a huge increase in demand. (Paradoxically, it was easier to be credibly leftist in the early 1990s than in more recent years since the major decisions on initial economic reform at least entailed policies with redistributive implications, for instance, in the chosen method of privatization. However, once these structural reforms were initiated and the economy continued to grow, if at all, at low rates, then governments needed to adapt policy to limit damage.) Just as economic crisis management receded in the most successful cases, a new set of policy constraints kicked in to fulfill the accession requirements for membership in the EU: a functioning and competitive market economy, high administrative capacity in both the private and public sector, a clean judiciary and working interior forces. Each state had to demonstrate a good record on everything from banking regulation to minority rights, harmonize its relevant national legislation with EU principles, and adopt in full the *acquis communitaire*, the existing rules, regulations, and agreements of the European Union, with the highest priority. Recently, the European Commission has made it clear that formal adoption by law is inadequate; full implementation must be seen before membership will be contemplated. This requirement poses serious budgetary problems for the acceding states.

Because of the overwhelmingly valence nature of party competition in eastern Europe the most entrepreneurial parties have developed a strategy to distinguish themselves competitively by emphasizing the sequencing of reforms, credibility in delivering reforms, and, most important, the operating style of the party rather than a coherent ideological position. The defining characteristic of instant catch-all parties is their appeal to all of the people, all of the time. In their bid to capture the largest constituency, such parties dare only the most consensual of commitments (often regardless of feasibility) and seek only the most highly conditional form of support. In this respect, they share the competitive logic of western European catch-all parties, but they lack their ideological and organizational anchors. Moreover, they must then manage an extraordinarily constrained public policy agenda without destroying their own popularity. Where eco-

nomic preconditions were profoundly unfavorable, social conditions already harsh, and public tolerance for austerity unknown and likely to be low, populist rhetoric and postponement or abandonment of the reform process for short-term electoral gain (or to hobble the new government that inherited the economic crisis) have represented the few substantive strategic choices available to East European political entrepreneurs. These strategies, however, have proven economically devastating to the countries concerned.[13]

The few instant catch-all parties that possess a distinct mass base, the Communist successor parties, have with the exception of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia maintained a section of these bases despite repudiating Communism ideologically. As for other party types, it is vital to note that parties that chose more predictably programmatic, ideological, or constituency-based strategies over instant catch-all strategies have simply done badly, and in countries escaping patrimonial or bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes they have done badly from the start. Whether those attempting to revive such historical identities as social democracy, Catholic populism, and agrarianism have been the direct heirs or former members of historical parties, or whether the attempts have been made by young entrepreneurial politicians looking to cash in on some previous historical success, such as the Slovak National Party, those that gambled that their societies were still being motivated by the deep and politicized divisions of the interwar period have been disappointed. The relative failure of historical parties and the continuing success of instant catch-all parties might imply that Communism, but in particular patrimonial and bureaucratic-authoritarian Communism, had a significant impact in destroying precommunist political identities. More obviously, however, the emergence of a dominant electoral strategy reflects the extreme restrictions in policy choices faced by East European countries in transition; restrictions that nostalgic parties can only fail to wish away. In essence, if a party can make no substantial policy choices, then an intrinsically open-ended instant catch-all strategy is the only viable option, and the politicians' substantive choice is whether or not to pursue the reform agenda in good faith.

Three very specific forms of instant catch-all party have emerged in eastern Europe: technocratic, nationalist, and populist. Technocratic parties claim to have the technical expertise that will carry the population through the transition. (In emphasizing professionalism, one might argue that these parties come closest to the western model of cartel party, except that they do not operate in party-colluding, cartelized systems.) Populist parties try to mobilize the entire electorate by convincing them that they, above all others, care most about the ordinary person.[14] Nationalist parties try to mobilize on the basis of national identity, but, clearly, many ideas may be logically attached to this principle.

Technocratic, nationalistic, and populist principles are all highly, indeed, maximally flexible in how they can be used to legitimate any policy after the fact. These identities hardly commit parties even to a basic left-right preference on policymaking, for either cultural or economic issues. Because of their fundamentally noncommittal nature

(beyond their standard claim to be proreform in principle), instant catch-all parties retain a huge amount of flexibility in terms of the policies on which they choose to campaign, the policies they will adopt once in power, and their development as parties in the future. The most decisive historical inheritance has been the straightforward identification as anticommunist of those not irredeemably identified with the former regime. This identification continues to play a prominent role in party competition in each country. By competing on their different modes of operation (the application of expertise, the pursuit of national realization, and the solution of grievances, respectively), elites may obscure the lack of realistic policy options during the transition, even as they retain extreme leeway in terms of ultimate policy choices. Such identities are ideal—and entirely rational—for elites coping with the extreme demands of postcommunist transformation, but they have distinct consequences for the democratizing benefits that are supposed to come with emerging party competition. A party that defines policy in an ad hoc fashion after it has been elected creates many problems. Not only is it difficult for an opposition party to pin down a governing party's faults; it is also extremely difficult to develop clear lines of party identification, not only for individuals, but also for interest groups and civil institutions. This lack of moorings perpetuates the isolation of civil society from the state and the instability of the democratic party system.

Each type of strategy—nationalist, technocratic, and populist—hardly exists in a pure form. Most instant catch-all parties blend elements of all three. One aspect typically dominates, though the central style may shift. Most strikingly, nationalist and populist strategies have been intertwined in the sense that the pure and ordinary people of populist rhetoric are typically defined as the dominant ethnic group, a pragmatic electoral strategy that has carried severe consequences for national minorities.

The choice of styles has been contingent on the specific Communist legacy of 1989 in terms of the background and disposition of political elites created under Communism and the credibility with which they might adopt one or a combination of these three strategies. Critical in distinguishing Polish and Hungarian competition, both countries before 1989 produced credible proreform technocratic elites that later joined both sides of the regime divide after 1989. The nonideological, technocratic elites coming out of the Communist parties that had attempted to reform the state and economy under Communism transformed themselves into ostensibly social-liberal transition technocrats after 1989.[15] Poland and Hungary duly emerged with a stable mainstream core of parties that supported reform in both word and deed. Having experienced reformist pressures for over twenty years, moreover, Hungary and Poland were the only two states in which reformist elites could believe themselves to represent sizable constituencies and where it was clear that there existed huge latent support for rapid entry in the European Union even at a high social cost.[16] (The electoral success of radical reform in Poland was clearly aided by the hyperinflation, chronic shortages, and unserviceable external debt that beset Poland during the Communist collapse.) A further legacy of national-accommodative Communism was the survival of relatively open social divides

that proved capable of supporting stable religious and peasant parties after 1989. They added further structure to Polish and Hungarian political life and allowed for more nuanced, programmatic politics around a relatively explicit reform consensus.

Where only one instant catch-all party emerged, however, it tended to dominate the new party system to such a degree that party competition became extremely difficult. The Czech Civic Democratic Party, the Slovak Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, and the Party of Social Democracy in Romania are cases in point. They are all legatees of either patrimonial or bureaucratic-authoritarian Communist regimes. Where there is more than one catch-all party and competition between various forms of the new types of catch-all party, as in Bulgaria, Romania, and eventually Slovakia and the Czech Republic in the mid 1990s among nationalists, populists, and technocrats (albeit with populist tendencies), party competition has remained at an extremely high level of political abstraction. Since in these states civil society is weak and international pressure on specific policy options is extremely strong, politicians have had few incentives or pressures to develop party competition more concretely.[17] In all states, even in Hungary and Poland, daily public debate nevertheless remains dominated by secondary issues where contrasting positions may most credibly be taken: corruption, anti-Semitism, and disputes over who was on which side of the barricades in the Communist period. The critical public policy issues that affect hugely on daily life remain a discrete issue of government capacity and implicit electoral risk taking.

National-Accommodative Communism: Poland and Hungary

After 1989 two highly technocratic parties developed in Poland from the previous system divide. The first emerged from the anticommunist opposition movement of the 1980s, the free trade union Solidarity; the second, from the reform wing of the Polish United Workers Party, the Communist party. Radical marketization with all its inherent social and electoral costs has remained a valence issue. Both Solidarity governments (1989–1993 and 1997–2001), their union roots notwithstanding, and the governments of Social Democracy of the Polish Republic (SdRP) (1993–1997 and after 2001) have all continued restrictive economic policies and pursued EU membership. Even at the harshest point of shock therapy, the SdRP, whose only hope of survival was to prove itself a responsible democratic party, informally supported the Solidarity governments. State-society relations under national-accommodative Communism evidently had a defining impact on the constellation of parties in the current Polish mainstream. Since a Polish political elite had roots in large sections of society that dissented from Communism, and society was further distinguished by a vibrant Catholic church, an internally varied anticommunist elite could appeal to these connections as a source of identity, patriotism, reformist credibility, and/or nationalist prestige. The existence of two sets of credibly reformist elites, former Communists and diverse anticommunists,

has generated partisan political competition in Poland with explicit radical reform and the opposition of secularism to religiosity at its heart.

The metamorphosis of Poland's first post-1989 finance minister, Leszek Balcerowicz, from Solidarity's technocratic economist, bent on installing as much market reform before politics intervened, to the ever more coherently liberal free market politician heading his own party, Freedom Union (UW), is highly illuminating. It occurred out of the necessity to compete as a party politician against other credible technocratic reformers in the SdRP. The Freedom Union nevertheless went into the 1997 Polish election campaign with the slogan "left, right but always forward," thus continuing to emphasize the party's reformist credibility over and above any form of ideological partisanship. The evolution of the right in Poland has been driven by the competence of the Communist successor party in other ways. Solidarity Electoral Action (AWS) emerged in response to the 1993 victory of the SdRP. When Solidarity fell apart in 1991, the right splintered so severely that it lost its place in parliament in the 1993 election.[18] A grouping of almost forty right-wing, nationalist, religious groupings coalesced into an extremely broad coalition, the AWS, whose election campaign furthered national, religious, but most essentially anticommunist principles. The right thus translated its dissident identity into a positive emphasis on national and religious values. It presented its roots as principled Catholic Poles who had opposed Communism in order to distinguish themselves from the former Communists and the radical but secular free marketeers of the Freedom Union.

Following the 1997 election the AWS lurched towards more vocal religiosity and nationalism, reflecting its lack of agreement over technical economic reform issues for which it had relied upon its coalition partner, the Freedom Union. The AWS floundered in the campaign for the October 2000 presidential elections. The SdRP incumbent, Aleksander Kwasniewski, won in the first round. The AWS lost momentum in economic policy and was beset by scandal, all the more damaging since the AWS, its Solidarity heritage preeminent, had sold itself as the incorruptible political force in 1997. The AWS was duly punished again by its eviction from parliament in the September 2001 election and the victory of the SdRP's electoral coalition.

The SdRP emphasizes reform, secular identity, pro-Europeanism, and mitigation of the worst social costs of transition. Balcerowicz's Freedom Union and the new Civic Platform are secular, pro-European, and anticommunist and support the free market. As anticommunist feeling fades, the right-wing parties coalesce, and the economic situation improves (the latter being contingent on membership in the EU and the consequent currency stability), this arrangement should produce party competition over alternative policy agendas rather than alternative absolute values about the way society should operate.

Even more than Poland, Hungary illustrates the inescapability of economic reform at the heart of transition politics and the advantages bestowed by a history of robust conflict against Communist homogenization. The first Hungarian postcommunist govern-

ment was conservative and nostalgic, with dissidents at its core. It tried to continue the gradualist economic approach of the previous regime by introducing restrictive monetary, budgetary, and income policies only in steps after 1990 to avoid any destabilizing public mobilization. In 1994, however, the Hungarian Democratic Forum was defeated by the former Communists in a landslide. The Hungarian Socialist Party (HSP) was by this time a party of young technocratic modernizers; its government, under Gyula Horn, not only continued large-scale privatization but also launched radical stabilization (shock therapy) by cutting back the bureaucracy and social security benefits and kick-starting foreign direct investment.[19] In the second half of the 1990s, to compete with the Hungarian Socialist Party, another dissident party, FIDESZ, the former Young Liberals, moved from a left liberal position to a combination of technocratic economics and pragmatic nationalism. It thoroughly replaced the Hungarian Democratic Forum as the dominant party of the right. In Hungary therefore, by virtue of the Kadarist generation in the Communist party and the nostalgic tendencies of the older dissidents, the reformist HSP capitalized first on a technocratic instant catch-all strategy.

As the only country to emerge with what looked like instant multiparty politics in 1989, Hungary is often cited as the region's exception to the problem of party system development. Yet in Hungary, as elsewhere, political success has followed the most obviously catch-all parties, the formerly Communist Hungarian Socialist Party and FIDESZ. FIDESZ switched entirely to a catch-all electoral strategy before it defeated the Socialists in May 1998. By 1998 FIDESZ had discovered the mix of technocratic politics and nationalism that maximized its credibility both as a party of young technocrats and as a party with dissident roots. In the 1998 election campaign FIDESZ introduced specific problems regarding European Union membership and claimed it would be a tougher negotiator, particularly on agricultural issues. It thus set apart a pragmatic nationalist FIDESZ from both the nostalgic nationalism of the Hungarian Democratic Forum and the more pro-European stance of the Hungarian Socialist Party. The latter, the word "Socialist" in its name notwithstanding, projected itself not as ideological, or even as left-wing, but rather as a party of technocratic modernizers, modernization, as Bozoki has pointed out, being equated with secular pro-Europeanism and the imitation of all things modern and pro-European Union.[20] (The HSP also designated itself as "Blairite"!)

It is apparent in Hungary that parties emphasizing precommunist identities rather than competence have either stayed on the political margins or been pushed to them. The nostalgic Hungarian Democratic Forum has been electorally punished (winning only 3.1 percent of the vote in 1998) by parties that emphasize their pragmatism and desire to look forward. The historical parties have thus been beaten by those that understood EU membership and economic reform as valence issues and developed competitive strategies accordingly. Some electoral space in the countryside was left for parties adopting populist opposition to that agenda. As in Poland, therefore, the development of technocratic parties of former Communists and anticommunists opened up Hungarian

politics to substantial competition between parties that are similarly explicit in their intentions to pursue radical reform measures as swiftly as possible.

Bureaucratic-Authoritarian Regimes: Czech and Slovak Republics

Czechoslovakia is the one independent case of a bureaucratic-authoritarian regime. (The political trajectory of the GDR was subsumed by German reunification.) In Czechoslovakia regime stagnation and extreme ideological conformity after the suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968 precluded the development of credible reformist cadres within the Communist Party and perpetuated the severe suppression of political opposition. The opposition was therefore tiny, fragmented, and isolated from society at large. Consequently, Czechoslovak Communism ended late and through revolutionary mass overthrow, not by pact. The Communist Party was unable to reform itself, yet unwilling to unleash a blood-bath, and capitulated to two civic blocs, the Czech Civic Forum and the Slovak Public against Violence. These movements amalgamated disparate groupings. They were tenuously linked to the societies they claimed to represent and were pulled together by Prague-centric dissident intellectuals who emerged from the underground.

The failure of the Communist state to attempt serious reform before 1989 rendered legatees of the Communist Party devoid of reformist credibility. The Communists lacked the critical mass of leadership and membership with the will to transform the party into a substantively new form. Equally, however, the challenging political elite could not know the reform tolerance of the electorate, and, given Czechoslovakia's relatively steady standard of living in the previous twenty years, had few electoral incentives to test it. Most striking about subsequent Czech and Slovak political developments has been their reliance on the transition itself to produce political identities and issues (notably, strategies of economic reform, questions of anticommunist retribution, the balancing of Czech-Slovak relations, and later corruption, civil society, and market regulation). Both Czech and Slovak cases indicate extreme contingency in the development of electoral strategies in the aftermath of bureaucratic authoritarianism. Party politics lack stabilizing roots in either the debates or the identities of dissident movements, deep and transparent societal cleavages, and Communist reform movements. They are therefore easily dominated by instant catch-all strategies. However, history still counts: it has determined who can credibly play with what strategy.

In these circumstances it was a major problem for would-be political entrepreneurs in Czechoslovakia to figure out how, with elections set for 1992, they might distinguish themselves. Politicians had somehow to tie the agreed question of marketization to issues of competence (for populism before reform could just look crypto-communist) or to other signifiers of regime change. More entrepreneurial parliamentarians within the

civic blocs rapidly began to explore their options. Extreme forms of instant catch-all strategy duly emerged as optimal. For the credible technocrats in the Civic Forum, Czech economists with roots in the old regime's gray zone of nonpolitical professionals, the clearest path forward was to take the idea of competence in managing economic reform to its furthest logical point. Vaclav Klaus, the Civic Forum's finance minister and founder of a new Civic Democratic Party within parliament, duly began to present radical market reform as a scientific path to democracy and prosperity. By presenting neoliberalism not as one ideology open to contestation but as something approaching a scientific formula for the return to Europe, Vaclav Klaus effectively coopted the pre-1989 culture of political orthodoxy to his new party's political advantage. By 1992, however, Czech dogmatism in refusing to moderate federal policy to accommodate Slovakia's structural disadvantages, even to offer rhetorical recognition of their existence, rendered radical marketization an increasingly untenable position for Slovak political entrepreneurs.

Through 1991 and 1992 Vladimir Meciar, the wiliest politician to emerge from the Public against Violence, situated his new Movement for a Democratic Slovakia between Slovak Nationalists and Christian Democrats, who were attempting and failing to resurrect historical political identities, and Slovak liberals. The liberals, the rump of the Public against Violence following Meciar's exit in April 1991, first demonstrated their social isolation by persistently supporting Klausite reform and then fell on their own swords in June 1992 by forming an electoral coalition with the Civic Democratic Alliance, the one openly nationalist Czech party. Meciar's Movement gained ground between 1991 and 1992 by criticizing the technocratic economic policies coming from Prague as unfair, even as it maintained a broadly pro-reform position. Meciar's dominance of Slovak politics throughout the 1990s is indicative of the success of bureaucratic-authoritarian Communism in separating dissident elites from societal roots and of the vulnerability of Slovak political development to contingent phenomena, for example, the distortion of marketization as a valence issue in Slovak political life by the initial Czech economic dogmatism.

The Czech and Slovak party systems today can not be understood without reference to the preemption of party competition within Czechoslovakia prior to its partition on January 1, 1993.[21] Following the Czech partition of the state, the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) and the Movement for a Democratic Party (HZDS) became the founding parties of newly independent states, and both capitalized on state-building nationalist legitimation in addition to their original instant catch-all operating styles.

The profound contingency of Czech political strategy was apparent throughout the 1990s. Once economic conditions began to worsen through 1997 and 1998 and the right-wing coalition was beset by corruption scandals, Klaus lost the unique leverage gained through his party's authorship of an economic strategy of growth without pain in the early 1990s. Support for the Czech Social Democracy Party (CSSD) steadily rose.

The CSSD, the legatee of the interwar party, had failed to enter parliament in 1990 but had nevertheless emerged as a parliamentary player when Civic Forum members established a Social Democratic Party within parliament through a new party caucus. From within parliament, then, grew the Social Democrats' reputation as a supporter of a state-regulated market, as a strong critic of Klausite reform, and more generally as a representative of principles derived from the Socialist International, presented in the reformist terms of kick-starting economic growth, fighting corruption and crime, and nurturing judicial independence. The campaign for early elections, held in June 1998, revealed a degree of political disarray and massive voter volatility that took many commentators by surprise.[22] Klaus's election slogan was classic technocratic populism: "If you believe in yourself, vote Klaus." More destructive of competition, however, was Klaus's insistence that the ODS remained the country's only democratic party, while all others were to be understood as antisystem. On the last day of campaigning the ODS placed notices across the country proclaiming "Mobilisace," (as in 1938) calling on the people to defend their freedom while they may. Moreover, the Social Democrats were only able to form a minority government after the 1998 elections and have proved unable to move away from the Klausite legacy. They have spent more than they can afford on welfare to maintain the social peace, while bailing out and privatizing the Czech Republic's languishing banks, at punitive public expense. Thus trapped in public policy terms, public debate in the Czech Republic has degenerated into an endless battle over corruption and the essentially peripheral issues evoked by EU membership, such as the legal status of the Benes decrees affecting the rights of Sudeten Germans. Finally, since all political sides attempt to disqualify each other through accusations of corruption, the electorate has more immediately become disgusted with the political system. Czech opinion polls report persistently low esteem for both government and parliament.

Following Slovak independence Meciar's Movement could hardly continue the radical reform policies that it had criticized so forcefully in the Czechoslovak federation, yet economic reform was far from complete. Meciar floundered and reacted through 1993 and 1994 by restricting monetary policies and increasing budgetary imbalances, stalling the privatization process, and adopting populist slogans, in an attempt to keep the process on track but with lower social and electoral costs. The Movement duly lost the sincere reformers it had included under the federation and was finally ousted in a no confidence vote in March 1994. As in the Czech Republic in 1998, however, the loss of one hegemonic instant catch-all party revealed the disarray in the rest of the party system. The subsequent interim coalition of non-Meciar forces was deeply divided yet sufficiently responsible (and electorally naive) to introduce enough reforms to bring great economic pain just before fresh elections occurred six months later. When these coalition partners then fought against each other in the campaign, the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia was reelected. The new Meciar government (1994–1998) continued with half-measures, but this time it combined them with systematic corruption and an increasingly authoritarian and nationalist populism.

For formerly promarket parties like Meciar's, one obvious way out of the competition dilemma posed by the existence of too many major valence issues was to resort to demagogic politics. Meciar's party declared itself pro-EU yet accused the EU of conspiring to humiliate Slovakia; it accompanied promarket rhetoric with fiscal expansionism. The strategy of pooling constituencies through charismatic grievance-mongering, however, was both electorally and economically devastating. In Meciar's case it led to his ouster in 1998 and transformed his once diverse electorate into a hard core of rural pensioners and the lower-educated. Nevertheless, until Meciar became more explicitly authoritarian (1996–98), opposition parties had tremendous difficulties in formulating appealing programs to counter his populism. Only in 1998, when Slovakia was internationally isolated, corruption scandals engulfed the government, and a gerrymandering electoral law finally jolted the hitherto fragmented opposition into a common electoral bloc, could the opposition stick together on a basic restatement of the Slovak democratic and marketizing project. In government since 1998, moreover, this bloc has suffered from continual internal friction. It is, after all, an ideologically unnatural alliance that survives on the common rejection of Meciarism.

Patrimonial Communist Regimes: Romania and Bulgaria

As with bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes, political strategists emerging from patrimonial Communism had little certainty about the nature of their liberated electorates, but, given their economic conditions and political-economic history, they had even less scope for relying on the popularity of radical change and major economic restructuring. The most rational electoral strategy, therefore, has been, in contrast to the former Czechoslovakia, to promise change without pain.[23] The pace of reform has, on the whole, been slow and stuttering, and instant catch-all strategies of various types have been used to cover essentially stony electoral ground. Nevertheless, Romania and Bulgaria, like the Czech and Slovak Republics, have faced the same inability to avoid painful economic reform, the same lack of internal social cleavages and clear constituencies, and the same lack of socially rooted political elites. Finally, they both have possessed even less scope for contestation over the pace of reform, because rapid reform appeared likely to introduce truly severe social dislocation and consequently electoral punishment. Thus, instant catch-all strategies have so evaded reform issues and lacked realistic reform proposals that, when coupled with economic failure, they have tended to make party elites look impotent and/or corrupt in the face of intractable economic conditions. Only when conditions deteriorated to extremes of hyperinflation, as in Bulgaria in 1997, have governments been freed to take a more actively reformist line.

Although the actual transfer of power differed dramatically in Bulgaria and Romania, there are some critical points of similarity in terms of Communist legacy. The most apparent was the continuing dominance of former Communist Party forces in

society and the diffuse and profoundly inexperienced nature of the opposition. The nature of the transfer of power itself, however, significantly affected where new political forces could locate themselves. In Bulgaria the pressure on the Communist Party had really come from within the party itself, as a generational conflict, thus providing the party reformists with some initial credibility as reformists (which they lost steadily when in government from 1990 to 1991 and then entirely in 1994–97). In contrast, in Romania, Ceausescu was overthrown in what Ken Jowitt described as a "movement of rage," in a violent battle between the exhausted people and the megalomaniac regime. It was extremely unclear in the aftermath of the Romanian revolution which parties had roots or where. Although the National Salvation Front was put together by political insiders, all emerging elites repudiated any connection to the former regime. The mode of extrication from Communism itself produced both credible and less credible paths of elite political development.

Conclusions

Persistent elite autonomy may provide flexibility in managing transitions and creating pragmatic coalitions, but such practical autonomy makes it impossible for the electorate to hold politicians to account for their actions other than by judging their country's performance in the broadest possible terms, by rejecting one peculiarly noncommittal group for another. The most obvious illustration of flexible instant catch-all principles has been the implementation of fiscal austerity by Hungarian, Polish, and Romanian postcommunists, Slovak populists, socialists, and Christian Democrats and Czech technocrats of various shades, and now the heir to the Bulgarian throne. When party labels become this meaningless, it raises the question of how stable partisanship and consequently system stabilization can be established. Even with some emerging political tendencies, like nationalism and Catholicism, what can these limited political identities amount to when they may be coopted by one highly flexible group after another?

A spin weary western European might suggest that today's East European politics look familiar, that eastern and western European politics are converging. There is, however, a critical difference in the severity of the factors affecting party politics between the EU's candidate and member states: the latter may negotiate their positions within the EU on a daily basis, while the former are presented with accession criteria and decisions on EU evolution as a *fait accompli.* Moreover, for all New Labour's entrepreneurialism, western Europe's mainstream parties continue to carry far more historical baggage than successful parties in eastern Europe. They retain core constituencies, and public expectations of policy accountability at election time remain high. The resemblance, then, is superficial. An evolved consensus in developed economies should not be confused with a profound lack of choice in those economies struggling to escape poverty.

Eastern Europe faces a deepening tension between what is "objectively" good for a

country (pursuing reform and EU membership) and what is good for electoral accountability and thus each system's legitimacy. Paradoxically, the existence of both internal and external constituencies with significant leverage places the most democratic politicians, those who wish genuinely to enhance the accountability and representative qualities of their domestic political system, in the greatest quandary.

All three types of catch-all party have a strong potential to generate instability. Technocrats may fail to deal with real political conflicts of interest by insisting that their chosen method must not be contravened or, in more populist mode, by insisting that experts can resolve everything. Both approaches are a gift to demagogic populists, who then claim that only they understand those who have lost out. Technocrats presenting EU membership as a panacea are opening the way to populists and nationalists when accession becomes problematic. Populists tend in practice to be authoritarian since popular rhetoric relies strongly on charisma; populism is thus the least predictable mode of all. For populist nationalist governments, state-building nationalism in practice has tended to be chauvinist, in particular where vulnerable minorities such as the Roma have been concerned.

The region's political entrepreneurs, moreover, are starting to capitalize on the public's growing frustrations with political unaccountability. This strategy is clear in the recently formed and immensely popular Slovak party Direction. In Direction a young and talented politician, Robert Fico, emphasizes that transition is an unpredictable and essentially technical problem and presents his party as composed of experts who should be trusted like philosopher kings. (Their campaign slogan for 2002 is "No more promises.") Instead of offering deeper accountability, Direction makes a virtue of offering none at all, taking technocratic politics to its logical, supposedly benign dictatorial conclusions.

Prospects for deepening programmatic competition are far better in Poland and Hungary than elsewhere. The Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania face similar challenges. They all suffer from the political disarray and instability inherent in an instant catch-all party system where only one or no credible technocratic parties exist. The Czechs currently operate under considerably more political uncertainty than either Hungarians or Poles. Only 15 percent of the electorate voted in the second round election for the upper house, the Senate, in 2000, and a protest movement calling itself Thank You, Now Leave! in 1999 requested that all political leaders resign and collected a petition supported by 150,000 signatures. Twenty-five percent of those polled at the time said they would vote for any party emerging out of the petition movement, and a further 25 percent said they would support the unreconstructed Communist Party, a spectacular Czech protest vote.

It is widely assumed that European Union membership is a political asset for eastern Europe. The application process is said to reinforce democratic consolidation insofar as it exacts general policy and institutional standards. However, it could have a debilitating effect, arresting party developments by excluding from political competition those sub-

stantive, grass-roots, ideological policy conflicts around which western European party systems evolved. This constraint would hardly matter if some sort of competition nevertheless developed and these countries began, like Germany after World War II, to converge with European standards of living and law. If EU enlargement is stalled, however, then the pegging of reform to the idea of necessary conditions for EU membership may yet prove a hostage to fortune. Moreover, as Meciar made plain, once the idea of EU membership is given up (or, more dangerous still, is forcibly given up), then valence issues are far less clear, and a whole new ballgame begins. As long as valence issues remain dominant, however, and until growth opens up the possibility of real policy adjustments in socially ameliorative directions, it is hard to see how this electoral experience could encourage a sense of personal political agency among the voting public, a serious flaw when trying to persuade populations about the participatory optimism of democracy.

NOTES

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1. Richard Rose, Neil Munro, and Tom Mackie, "Elections in Central and Eastern Europe since 1990," *Studies in Public Policy*, 300 (Glasgow: University of Strathclyde, 1998), 118.
2. Herbert Kitschelt, Zdenka Manfeldova, Radoslaw Markowski, and Gabor Toka, *Post-Communist Party Systems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 137.
3. The countries of the former Yugoslavia are excluded because their conflicts have acted as a major determining element in their political development. Similarly, Albania's descent into clan rule excludes it. German reunification instigated an exceptional fusion of party systems, thus excluding the GDR. The pervasiveness of instant catch-all party strategies in countries with different electoral laws (multimember districts in Hungary, list proportional representation in Poland) and highly fluid institutional configurations (the partition of Czechoslovakia, the persistent weakness of parliament in Romania, the recent shift to the direct election of the president in Slovakia, the adoption of a bicephalic executive only in 1997 in Poland) indicates that institutional structures are a weak explanatory factor in accounting for party strategy.
4. "Patrimonial communism...relies on vertical chains of personal dependence between leaders in the state and party apparatus and their entourage, buttressed by extensive patronage and clientelist networks." National-accommodative regimes developed out of the legitimacy crises of Polish and Hungarian Communism, during which sustained compromises were forced from the domestic regimes. Bureaucratic-authoritarian Communism evolved in those countries with experience of comparatively advanced capitalism and liberal democracy in the interwar period. "The discipline of a revolutionary party created outside of and against existing political institutions and the rise of a modern professional state machinery under precommunist rule made the new communist regimes more resistant than other modes of communist rule to patronage and clientelist politics." Kitschelt, Mansfeldova, Markowski, and Toka, pp. 23, 26.
5. Kitschelt, Mansfeldova, Markowski, and Toka tend to privilege the interwar legacies in shaping cleavage formation in the new democracies. Their argument, however, does not establish how or why political processes and cognitive legacies from the interwar period could have survived with sufficient coherence and personnel to trump the distribution of power and resources left over from Communism.
6. See Grigore Pop-Eleches, "Separated at Birth or Separated by Birth? The Communist Successor

Parties in Romania and Hungary," *Eastern European Politics and Societies*, 13 (Winter 1999); Anna Grzymala-Busse, "Determining the Public Image and Support of Political Parties in East Central Europe, 1992–1996," paper presented at the APSA Annual Meeting, Boston, September 2–6, 1998; Andras Bozoki, "The Ideology of Modernization and the Policy of Materialism: The Day after the Socialists," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 13 (September 1997); Attila Agh, "Partial Consolidation of the East-Central European Parties: The Case of the Hungarian Socialist Party," *Party Politics*, 1 (October 1995); John T. Ishiyama, "Communist Parties in Transition," *Comparative Politics*, 27 (January 1995); Herbert Kitschelt, "The Formation of Party Systems in East Central Europe," *Politics and Society*, 10 (March 1992); Herbert Kitschelt, "Party Systems in East Central Europe: Consolidation or Fluidity," *Studies for Public Policy*, 241 (Glasgow: University of Strathclyde, 1995); Geoffrey Evans and Stephen Whitfield, "Identifying the Bases of Party Competition in Eastern Europe," *British Journal of Political Science*, 23 (October 1993); Gordon Wightman, *Party Competition in East-Central Europe* (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1995); Paul G. Lewis, *Party Structure and Organisation in East-Central Europe* (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1996).

7. Kitschelt, Mansfeldova, Markowski, and Toka, p. 3

8. Otto Kirchheimer, "The Transformation of the Western European Party Systems," in Joseph LaPalombara and Myron Weiner, eds., *Political Parties and Political Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 177-200.

9. Peter Mair, ed., *The West European Party System* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 52.

10. Richard Katz and Peter Mair argued that the cartelization of party politics could occur as catch-all parties develop away from systemic reform and toward issues of social amelioration. Cartel parties compete on the basis of their effectiveness in policymaking as "partnerships of professionals, not associations of, or for, the citizens." State support is also a cartelizing factor "through which these parties...can enhance their capacity to resist challenges from newly mobilized alternatives." Richard Katz and Peter Mair, "Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party," *Party Politics*, 1 (January 1995), 16–19. Transitional states might offer opportunities for corruption, and parties might collude to compete nominally over proficiency in order to oligopolize the exploitation of public assets. However, "party systems in East-Central Europe are just not developed or stable enough either to enable the key party players to be clearly identified [at least in the earlier years] or for the likely candidates to agree on either shared political perspectives or mutual interests." Lewis, p. 12.

11. Lack of knowledge made their position profoundly different from that of western politicians developing cartel parties. Cartel parties in western Europe emerged out of traditions of interparty cooperation, an abundance of state support, and a high degree of issue and policy definition in the realm of transparently agreed social goals.

12. In Hungary the most deeply rooted dissident party, the Alliance of Free Democrats, lost to the emerging Hungarian Democratic Forum. However, the latter, by virtue of its conservatism, may be interpreted as the most different, or antidote, party.

13. Those abandoning fiscal prudence have suffered the withdrawal of World Bank and International Monetary Fund support, the withdrawal and nondevelopment of foreign investment, rapid inflation followed by collapsing exchange rates and attacks on the currency, and thus more inflation and capital flight. Consequently, output continues to collapse severely, making the elections ever harder to manage without resorting to authoritarian or corrupt practices. Prudently redistributive public policy requires growth, and only in Poland and Slovakia did aggregate GDP increase between 1990 and 1998, in Slovakia by 0.6 percent and in Poland by 4.5 percent. *World Bank Development Report* (1999–2000), p. 250.

14. Peter Wiles argued that populism is moralistic rather than programmatic, loosely organized, and ill-disciplined. It is a movement rather than a party. Its ideology is loose, antiintellectual, and strongly opposed to the establishment. Populism is corrupted by success, and, since populism is "so unsophisticated and lacking in ideological stability, this degeneration comes with unusual and tragic speed." Cited in Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner, eds., *Populism: Its Meaning and National Characteristics* (London: Macmillan, 1969), ch. 7.

15. Ishiyama.

16. The Hungarian Socialist Party's austerity package in March 1995 resulted in an estimated 12 percent drop in average annual income.

17. Where a single catch-all party becomes hegemonic, it is tempted to rewrite institutional rules (the division of power between executive and legislature and electoral rules). In Slovakia in 1998 the government proposed to rewrite electoral laws in the incumbents' favor, and in the Czech Republic in 2000 the formerly hegemonic Civil Democratic Party supported a minority Social Democrat government in order to extract constitutional changes. This factor is critical when considering the point at which institutional rules may become an exogenous constraint on competitive strategy. Institutional rules would become consistently guiding constraints in the formation of party strategy only when politics and political expectations become routinized. Radical reconfigurations of the party scene, made possible by unpredictable instant catch-all competition, stall public routinization by constantly reintroducing uncertainty. For postpatrimonial and post-bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes, therefore, institutional constraints are likely to remain endogenous as long as instant catch-all party politics predominates.

18. Almost thirty-five percent of voters chose parties that failed to enter the *Sejm*. Frances Millard, "The Shaping of the Polish Party System, 1989-1993," *East European Politics and Societies*, 8 (Fall 1994), 491–92.

19. Pop-Eleches, p. 126.

20. Bozoki.

21. See Abby Innes, *Czechoslovakia: The Short Goodbye* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

22. Klaus's popularity plummeted through Christmas 1997 only to rise again. The Freedom Union, a breakaway faction from the Civic Democratic Party, looked as if it might redefine a moderate conservative space but failed to establish a preelection profile. A Pensioners Party arose from nowhere to 10 percent support in opinion polls, and the far right Republicans and the far left Communists gained another 20 percent in opinion polls, despite their being taboo as coalition partners.

23. As the National Salvation Front's Silviu Brucan said: "Our ideology consists of five points: more food, more heat, more electricity and light, better transportation and better health care." Pop-Eleches, p. 120.