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### Surviving the Storm

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**"Surviving the Storm:  
Factors Determining Party Survival in Central and Eastern Europe"**

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## **Introduction**

Why do some parties live fast and die young, but others endure? Scholars of post-communist Central and Eastern Europe agree instability is one of the hallmarks of party politics in the region<sup>1</sup> and it is therefore no surprise that many have devoted their attention to the pervasive cycles of party birth and party death.<sup>2</sup> But rapid change has not affected every party in the region, and it is impossible to understand the dynamism in these party systems without also understanding the significant pockets of stability.

It is perhaps the *stability* of some parties that is in the most interesting and unexpected phenomenon in the region. Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)<sup>3</sup> in the past quarter of a century has experienced the post-communist challenges of democratization, marketization, state-building and integration into Western clubs, followed by the harsh economic conditions of the economic crisis after 2008 along with crises of the eurozone and international migration. Given this political context, the question is not how new parties were able to garner the votes of disillusioned and disenchanting voters battered by change, but why some parties within the party systems held on to their voters and a few achieved consistently impressive electoral results.

As a complement to the emphasis on change, this article makes a preliminary effort to understand the factors that characterize the parties that survived and to explore the ways in which they differ from those that have come and gone. Drawing on an extensive research

project integrating region-wide quantitative measures of parties and voters with in-depth fieldwork including semi-structured interviews with over 200 party officials from over 100 parties in 11 Central European countries, we argue that the key to unlocking the puzzle lies in combining sub-systemic and party-level factors.

How then to explain the partial and concentrated continuity? As we have argued elsewhere<sup>4</sup>, we can identify a distinctive new party subsystem in which new parties tend to rise and fall rapidly and get replaced by even newer ones. In contrast, parties that endure are striking for their combination of a well-developed organization on the ground, a clear position on an enduring issue dimension and an ability to change party leadership. These characteristics associated with party longevity are precisely those that are often missing in new parties.

### **Half Full or Half Empty? Different Levels of Stability**

As the introduction to this special issue highlights, whilst there is agreement that the region has not been an ocean of calm party stability, some scholars have tended to emphasize the changes, whereas others highlight the aspects of stability. As the work of Rovny and Polk underlines much of the difference stems from the level of analysis: whether scholars focus on the 'formal characteristics of party systems, party organization and voting behaviour' or on the 'ideological structuration of party placements'.<sup>5</sup> Focus on the former tends to lead scholars to emphasize the instability, whereas an analysis of the latter tends towards a greater focus on continuities.

Both these traditions bring some analytical purchase to our understanding of the dynamics of party politics, but both also tend to skate over variations within the levels of analysis. In terms of ideological structuration, it is possible to identify key elements of continuity. Ethnic-based appeals in particular, but also the values dimension (social conservatism versus social liberalism) and socio-economic left-right differences have all provided a degree of stability in party competition. Nevertheless, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century issues of competence, corruption and novelty have become increasingly important in structuring party competition.<sup>6</sup> These are far less rooted and tend to translate into ephemeral bases of party support, not least as competence, cleanliness and novelty tend to disappear rapidly particularly if a party enters government. Moreover, not just in CEE, but more broadly as Rohrschneider and Whitefield have argued, parties face the 'representational strain' of an increasingly diverse and heterogeneous electorates.<sup>7</sup>

When scholars turn their attention to the party systems, many tend towards emphasizing the 'extreme fluidity'.<sup>8</sup> But even a causal glance at the party politics of CEE indicates it is not just chaotic: there do appear to be some pockets of stability. The variations are not just revealed from comparing and contrasting different party systems, but are also evident within those systems: some parties have a fleeting existence whilst others endure and the degree of churn varies over time. Any satisfactory attempt to examine and explain stability and change of party systems, therefore, needs to examine not just the macro systemic level, but also the contrasting fates of individual parties.

### **Survival Patterns**

Measuring stability and change is complicated in a party environment characterized by frequent party splits, splinters and mergers.<sup>9</sup> Whilst traditional volatility measures based on Pedersen's Index can give us a rough indication of the overall magnitude of change in any given election cycle, they ultimately represent only a series of snapshots of individual election cycles. Recent advances which distinguish between intra- and extra- system volatility<sup>10</sup> offer additional information about longevity by differentiating between new parties and those already within the system, but even this extends the time frame only by one additional election, and cannot distinguish between continuity for a relatively new party which broke through at the last election and another party which has endured for decades. Measures which look directly at the average age of parties (weighted by party electoral performance) offer better ways of capturing the continuity within the system,<sup>11</sup> but even here results represent averages that cannot distinguish between one system with middle-aged parties and another split evenly between the very old and the very new. A better measure of party survival must differentiate among the share of support for longstanding parties and newer ones.

The simplest method of identifying patterns of long-term survival within party systems categorizes and counts parties according the period in which they first emerged. Figures 1a and 1b shows the recent distribution of political parties according to the era in which they first campaigned for election in their current form.<sup>12</sup> To maintain consistency across countries, the figures group the party births into five year periods beginning in 1990 and ending in 2014. (For the sake of consistency the figure does not include the 2015 and 2016 elections in Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia, but adding those numbers does little to change the overall result). The first column for each year reflects the total number of still-existing parties

(those that received more than 0.5 per cent in the most recent pre-2015 election) categorized by the period in which the party first emerged. Figure 2 gives the total vote share of such parties. Both figures exhibit a bimodal distribution with peaks for those parties with the most distant and most recent origins, and relatively smaller shares for parties that emerged during the periods in between.

Among the most recently emerged parties, the share is much smaller than the number, suggesting a larger number of smaller parties. The pattern is consistent with the other findings that new parties constitute a disproportionately large share in any given election in the region, but that most of these (usually but not always those with less initial support) do survive until the next election.<sup>13</sup> Share of parties and votes is considerably smaller among parties that emerged in previous cohorts, but with these parties the vote share of the cohort exceeds the share of all parties from that cohort, suggesting a more robust population. Among the oldest parties, the circumstances show yet a third pattern. Here the numbers and vote share are roughly proportionate but the totals are higher than any cohort other than the most recent one.

The oldest parties show a rather different pattern. The average number and average vote shares of these parties are nearly identical at around 30 per cent but it is the overall level that is worthy of comment. For parties established in the first half of the 1990s to receive 30 per cent of the vote in the first half of the 2010s is either unusually low or unusually high depending on the perspective. From the perspective of most Western European countries, the 30 per cent figure falls far short of the norm: the corresponding figure for Germany, for example, is over 70 per cent and for the United Kingdom and Sweden it is over 80 per cent. From the CEE perspective, by contrast, this first cohort's performance over time is unusually strong, since no subsequent cohort except the most recent one managed even 20 per cent of the average vote.

Figure 1

Emergence of political parties in specific time cohorts in the most recent parliamentary elections (through 2014) in Central and Eastern Europe

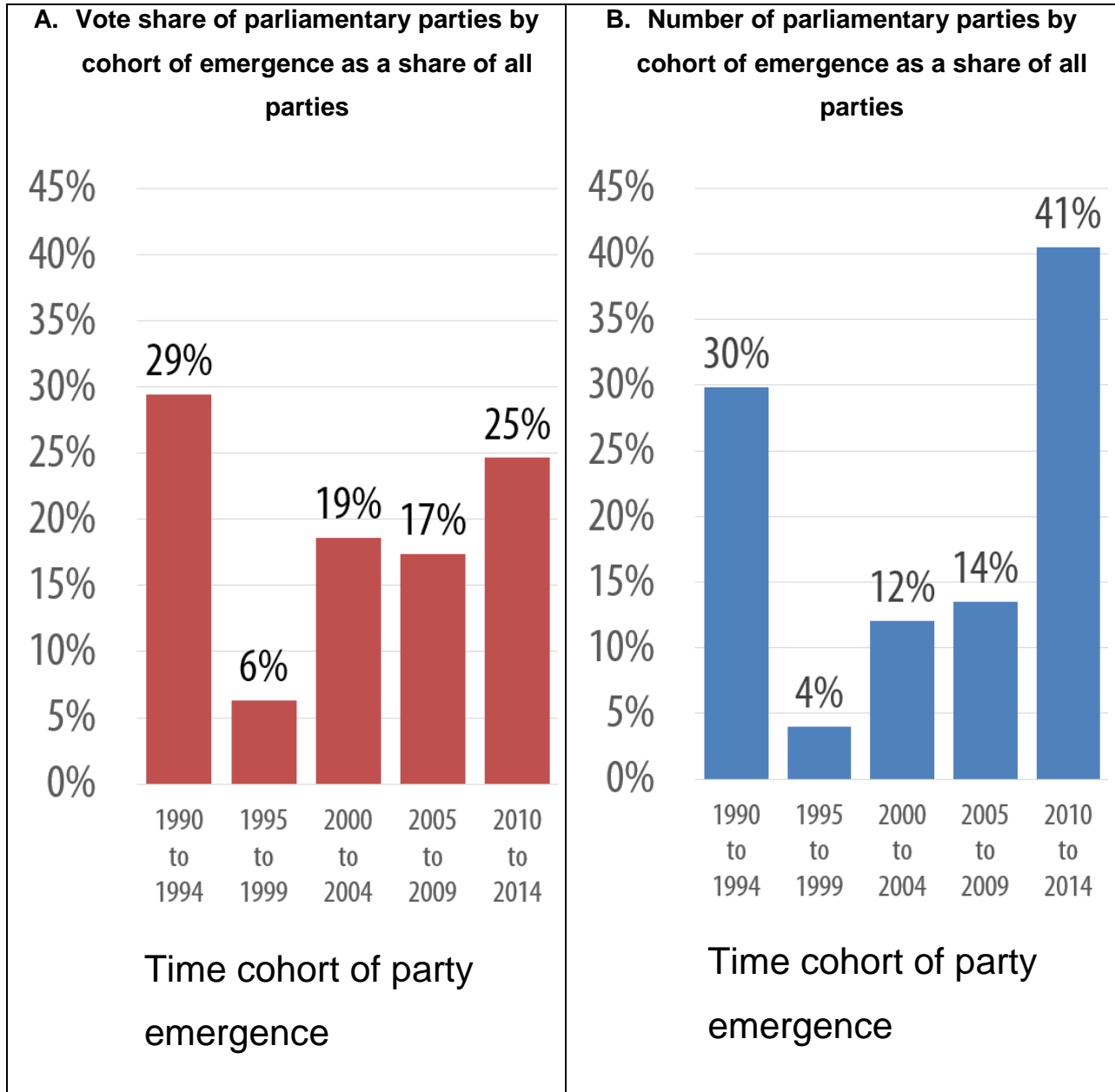


Table 1 shows, furthermore, that this pattern endured over time: in each five year period, the largest share has gone to the *oldest* cohort and in all cases but one (by a narrow margin) the

second largest share to the *most recent* cohort. Each election has produced a shrinking of the earlier cohorts, with the largest declines coming between a cohort's first and second period.

**Table 1**

**Average vote share by election period of parties emerging in specific time cohorts in the most recent parliamentary elections (through 2014) for Central and Eastern Europe**

| Period of Party Emergence (Cohort) | Share of vote for each cohort for latest election in time period |           |           |           |           |                        |
|------------------------------------|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------------------|
|                                    | 1990-1994  | 1995-1999 | 2000-2004 | 2005-2009 | 2010-2014 | 2015-2016 <sup>a</sup> |
| 1990-1994                          | 1.00   | 0.68      | 0.54      | 0.48      | 0.29      | 0.21                   |
| Absolute Change                    | -0.32  | -0.14     | -0.07     | -0.18     |           |                        |
| 1995-1999                          |  | 0.29      | 0.10      | 0.09      | 0.06      | 0.11                   |
| Absolute Change                    |  | -0.19     | -0.01     | -0.03     |           |                        |
| 2000-2004                          |  |           | 0.31      | 0.21      | 0.19      | 0.25                   |
| Absolute Change                    |  |           | -0.10     | -0.03     |           |                        |
| 2005-2009                          |  |           |           | 0.20      | 0.17      | 0.15                   |
| Absolute Change                    |  |           |           | -0.03     |           |                        |
| 2010-2014                          |  |           |           |           | 0.25      | 0.11                   |
| Absolute Change                    |  |           |           |           |           |                        |
| 2015-2016                          |  |           |           |           |           | 0.17                   |
| Absolute Change                    |  |           |           |           |           |                        |

<sup>a</sup>Only for countries with elections during this period (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia)

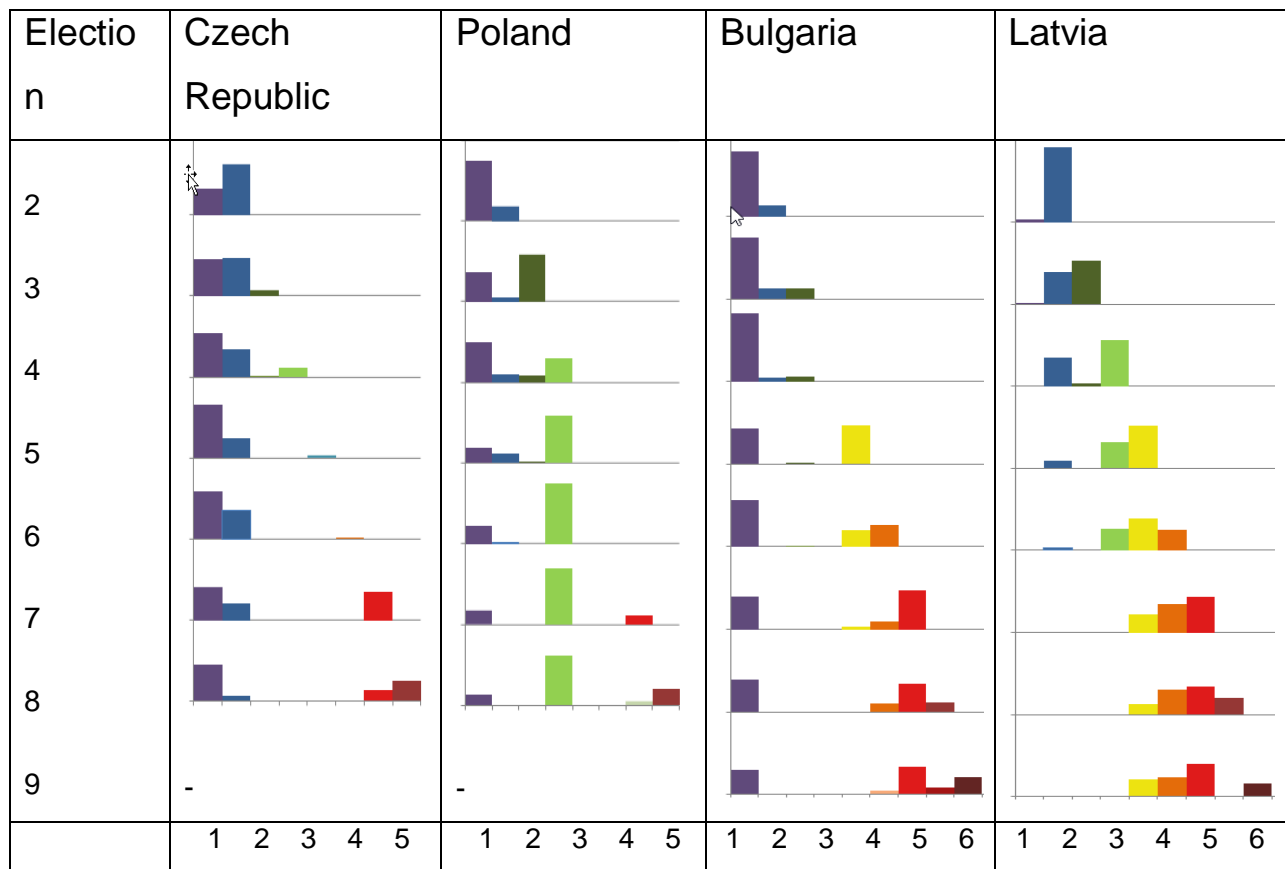
Although there is clearly a notable trend across the region, the aggregation used in these calculations hides even more vivid patterns that are revealed by a focus on individual party systems.<sup>14</sup> There is neither space nor need to present the results of each of these systems

individually as they fall into several fairly distinct patterns, and so four party system examples will suffice to capture the overall dynamics of the region.

Figure 3. sets aside the cohort approach necessary for aggregating results from multiple party systems and looks directly at election results. The figure shows the results for each election beginning with the second, with the bars in each chart representing the total support for parties emerging in those elections. Each successive election (moving downward within country columns) adds an additional year with its own shading (darkest and leftmost for the first election, lighter and further rightward for each additional election). In a country with no new parties, the dark leftmost bar would remain at 100% for every election. In a country with only new parties, each successive election would be represented by a lighter bar that was further from the left baseline. A system split in half between old and new parties would have a dark 50% bar on the left and a light 50% bar on the right.

**Figure 2**

**Party support by year of party emergence over multiple election periods between 1990 and 2015, by country (bars represent share of vote for parties emerging at each election)**





|  |                                      |                                      |                                      |                                      |
|--|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
|  | 6 7 8<br>Election when party emerged | 6 7 8<br>Election when party emerged | 7 8 9<br>Election when party emerged | 7 8 9 Election<br>when party emerged |
|--|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|

Source: Authors own calculations from national election commission websites

The case listed in the first of the columns—the Czech Republic—actually comes close to this hypothetical extreme, and the model shown here also closely resembles the patterns in Romania, Slovenia and Hungary. The progression is a stark one, with a well-established system of original-cohort parties that transformed suddenly in the early 2010s into a highly bimodal division between old and new. A large share of the parties founded in the early 1990s has endured, but almost nothing else has except for parties that burst through in the 2010 elections. In the second column, by contrast, the case of Poland (similar also to Slovakia and Estonia) shows a party system in which the original parties dominated only until the early 2000s when they were largely supplanted by several major new parties which were themselves threatened in the mid-2010s by yet another small but significant wave. The end result is a trimodal distribution between old, middle-aged and new parties. Bulgaria, pictured in the third column, combines elements of the previous two; it also experienced a major break in the early-2000s but the new party emerging at that time quickly failed and a series of newer parties have continued to attempt to fill the gap, producing an broader old-new gap. Finally, the fourth column depicts Latvia (akin also to Lithuania) where the party system is dominated by ever newer parties.

Perhaps the most vivid aspect of this depiction is the way that new parties seem to leapfrog one another across the time scale, each election weakening the previous cohort of new parties and bringing in *newer* new ones. But given this strong imperative toward “now,”<sup>15</sup> it is impossible to ignore the dark bars on the left of each graph except Latvia’s. Some early cohort parties manage to endure even when their successors do not. It is also important to recognize the few but striking cases (particularly in Poland, Slovakia, Estonia and to a certain extent also in Bulgaria) where new parties emerging later in the cycle manage to plant their own flag and endure against the apparent odds.

Table 2 provides a core list of significant parties that have managed to survive since the beginning of the post-Communist Era and their electoral performance over time. As with any exercise in list-making, there are certain to be disagreements about inclusions and exclusions (particularly as relates to mergers and splits) for the purposes of this exercise we have erred on the side of caution when considering continuity, avoiding parties which have experienced

significant splits and mergers (such as the Lithuanian Social Democrats which merged in 2001 with Democratic Labour Party of Lithuania).

**Table 3.**

**Roster of parties with long-term electoral success in Central and Eastern Europe, 1990-2016**

| Country        | Most Recent Party Name                    | Acronym | Election        |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |                 |
|----------------|---|---------|-----------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----------------|
|                |   |         | 1               | 2   | 3   | 4   | 5   | 6   | 7   | 8   | 9               |
| Bulgaria       | Bulgarian Socialist Party                 | BSP     | 53%             | 33% | 44% | 22% | 17% | 34% | 18% | 27% | 15%             |
|                | Movement for Rights and Freedom           | DPS     | 6%              | 8%  | 5%  | 8%  | 8%  | 14% | 15% | 11% | 15%             |
| Czech Republic | Communist Party of Bohemia & Moravia      | KSČM    | 13%             | 14% | 10% | 11% | 19% | 13% | 11% | 15% | -- <sup>a</sup> |
|                | Christian Dem. Union-Czech People's Party | KDU-ČSL | 8%              | 6%  | 8%  | 9%  | 14% | 7%  | 4%  | 7%  | -- <sup>a</sup> |
|                | Czech Social Democratic Party             | ČSSD    | 4%              | 7%  | 26% | 32% | 30% | 32% | 22% | 21% | -- <sup>a</sup> |
|                | Civic                                     | ODS     | -- <sup>b</sup> | 30% | 30% | 27% | 24% | 35% | 20% | 8%  | -- <sup>a</sup> |

|           |  |        |                 |     |                 |     |     |     |     |                 |                 |
|-----------|--|--------|-----------------|-----|-----------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----------------|-----------------|
|           | Democratic Partyz                      |        |                 |     |                 |     |     |     |     |                 |                 |
| Estonia   | Reform Party                           | RE     | -- <sup>b</sup> | 16% | 16%             | 18% | 28% | 29% | 28% | -- <sup>a</sup> | -- <sup>a</sup> |
|           | Centre Party                           | K      | -- <sup>b</sup> | 14% | 23%             | 25% | 26% | 23% | 25% | -- <sup>a</sup> | -- <sup>a</sup> |
| Hungary   | Hungarian Socialist Party              | MSZP   | 11%             | 33% | 33%             | 42% | 43% | 19% | 10% | -- <sup>a</sup> | -- <sup>a</sup> |
|           | Alliance of Young Democrats            | FIDESZ | 9%              | 7%  | 29%             | 41% | 42% | 53% | 45% | -- <sup>a</sup> | -- <sup>a</sup> |
| Lithuania | Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania | LRLA   | -- <sup>b</sup> | 2%  | 3%              | 2%  | 4%  | 5%  | 6%  | -- <sup>a</sup> | -- <sup>a</sup> |
| Poland    | Alliance of the Democratic Left        | SLD    | 12%             | 20% | 27%             | 41% | 11% | 13% | 8%  | 8%              | -- <sup>a</sup> |
|           | Polish People's Party                  | PSL    | 9%              | 15% | 7%              | 9%  | 7%  | 9%  | 8%  | 5%              | -- <sup>a</sup> |
| Romania   | Social Democratic Party                | PSD    | 66%             | 28% | 22%             | 37% | 37% | 33% | 29% | 45%             | -- <sup>a</sup> |
|           | Dem. Hungarian Union of Romania        | UDMR   | 7%              | 7%  | 7%              | 7%  | 6%  | 6%  | 5%  | 6%              | -- <sup>a</sup> |
|           | National Liberal Party                 | PNL    | 6%              | 3%  | -- <sup>c</sup> | 7%  | 20% | 19% | 17% | 20%             | -- <sup>a</sup> |

|          |                                  |     |     |     |     |                 |     |     |     |     |                 |
|----------|----------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----------------|
| Slovakia | Christ. Dem. Movement            | KDH | 19% | 9%  | 10% | -- <sup>c</sup> | 8%  | 8%  | 9%  | 9%  | 5%              |
|          | Slovak National Party            | SNS | 14% | 8%  | 5%  | 9%              | 3%  | 12% | 5%  | 5%  | 9%              |
|          | Party of the Hungarian Coalition | SMK | 9%  | 7%  | 10% | 9%              | 11% | 12% | 4%  | 4%  | 4%              |
| Slovenia | Social Democrats                 | SDP | 17% | 14% | 9%  | 12%             | 10% | 30% | 11% | 6%  | -- <sup>a</sup> |
|          | Slovene Farmers' Alliance        | SKZ | 13% | 9%  | 19% | 10%             | 7%  | 5%  | 7%  | 4%  | -- <sup>a</sup> |
|          | Slovenian Dem. Party             | SDS |     | 3%  | 16% | 16%             | 29% | 29% | 26% | 21% | -- <sup>a</sup> |

Source: European Journal of Political Research Political Data Yearbook, all issues.

<sup>a</sup>Country election cycles do not include this number of elections

<sup>b</sup>Party did not compete in first post-Communist elections

<sup>c</sup>Party participated in electoral coalition. In both of these cases results do not differ significantly from elections before and after.

Given the tendency to novelty in the region, this relatively small set of parties deserves closer scrutiny. In the section that follows, we highlight three factors that explain these hardy perennials' ability to weather the storms and survive the harsh winters in the political garden.

### Survival Factors

In examining the vulnerabilities of parties in Western Europe Peter Mair<sup>16</sup> identified three factors seen to have a special impact on the fate of individual parties rather than general ideological predispositions or broad political alignments: the party's organizational strategy and style, its specific appeals and its leadership. Mair's suggestion of factors that 'may be considered as having the capacity to have an impact upon the fortunes' of individual parties' offers a useful

framework from which to examine the exceptional features of the original cohort parties that have exhibited unusual longevity as well as the few later cohort parties that have shown the capacity to endure.

*Organization: Enduring by building*

Thanks in no small part to technological advances such as television and the internet, party organization has been seen to be increasingly unimportant in winning and retaining votes. Party organization is expensive and inefficient, as well as constructing cumbersome barriers to adaptation thanks to grassroots opinion which is often seen to be more inflexible to change. Indeed, in the early 1990s the expectation of many scholars was that the parties that would emerge in CEE would not have extensive organizational structures.<sup>17</sup> Subsequent developments suggest organization does not even appear to be necessary for initial success. Indeed, the electorally most successful new party breakthrough in CEE, Bulgaria's New Simeon II Movement (NDSV), was achieved by an organization that was not even registered as a party until a few weeks before the 2001 election and hence 'for all practical purposes' it can be said that NDSV won 42 per cent of the vote in that election 'with no members'.<sup>18</sup>

In more recent times the role played by the internet, especially social networking websites, in galvanizing electoral support for new parties such as Freedom and Solidarity in Slovakia, Bulgaria without Censorship, Kukiz '15 in Poland and Way of Courage in Lithuania suggests that an extensive party organization—indeed anything more than a shell—may not be necessary in 21st century electoral politics.

Yet large organizations also possess survival value. As the work of Spirova, Tavits and Ibenskas<sup>19</sup>, have cogently argued, however, there is a direct connection between party organization and party longevity. Tavits in particular shows it is not just the size of the party membership that matters, which is often the proxy measure for party organization<sup>20</sup>, but rather the extensive network of local branches. These branches combined with members and professional staff are important because they facilitate 'immediate, frequent and organized contacts with the electorate.'<sup>21</sup> They help mobilize voters, provide visibility for a party, marshal activists and run professional campaigns. Whilst blogs, Facebook and Twitter might mobilize the young, they do not have much

impact on older voters (who tend to be the most loyal) for whom personal contacts and interaction are particularly important. Whilst cautioning that it is not the single silver bullet of survival, Tavits' extensive empirical analysis of her four case studies (Estonia, Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic) demonstrates that parties that invest in strong party organizations are 'more likely to succeed electorally' and 'survive as significant players in the electoral arena.'<sup>22</sup>

The evidence from specific CEE countries helps to explain the ways in which the party organization actually promotes survival. A wide range of examples suggests that a developed party organization is at its most significant less in establishing a party on the political scene, but more in ensuring a party can weather the political storms associated with electoral set-backs and defeat. As with certain aspects of political leadership (see below), organization is not only about attracting voters but also—perhaps more importantly—about recuperation and transition during political difficulties. All of the parties in the region that have bounced back from major electoral set-backs to win subsequent elections, such as the Bulgarian Socialist Party, the Czech Social Democrats and the Civic Democratic Party in the Czech Republic, have had - at least in relative terms compared to their competitors - large memberships, extensive presence throughout their respective countries and a sizeable professional staff. Moreover, parties such as the Hungarian Socialists have relied on significant party organization and membership to survive scandals that other parties would have been fatal. Lack of organization, by contrast, contributes a brittleness to political party support.

Organization also becomes important in certain cases of victory. Entry into government—even as a junior partner - is extremely demanding of party resources, especially of human resources, drawing the party's best and brightest into governmental and support roles in various ministries. Prioritizing government at the expense of party organization has an immediate logic, but it weakens the party in the long-term.

A well-developed organizational structure, however, is no guarantee of survival. As the case of Slovakia shows well, the two parties with the largest membership and most extensive party organizations over the first two post-communist decades, the Movement

for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) and the Party of the Democratic Left both failed to survive. The key to both those parties' failures lies in leadership and in appeals.<sup>23</sup>

### *Appeals: Lengthening the shelf life*

A well-developed organization can help a party survive a storm, but voters tend not to choose a party because of its organizational structure. The survival of political parties depends not just about the vehicles of politics, but also the substance of political contestation i.e. the *content* of parties' electoral appeals. Here again, a characteristic seen as possibly incidental proves to be significant.

There has been a wide range of parties elected over the past quarter of a century in Central and Eastern Europe promoting nearly every conceivable agenda and some promoting none at all. Many parties did not seem to fit the traditional Lipset-Rokkan model and other standard issue dimension models. Indeed, at times it has seemed easier to explain patterns of party politics with reference to valence issues of competence, personalist leaders and new issues of corruption<sup>24</sup>, than the standard toolkit of party politics scholars.

Whilst not doubting that valence, competence, clean hands and personalistic appeals have offered something these are appeals which have been used to a greater extent by newer or wannabe entrants<sup>25</sup>. The list of surviving parties above contains an extremely high concentration of parties representing specific sides of long-standing conflicts: ethnic minorities (and some representing national goals of ethnic majorities), rural electorates, religious affiliations, post-Communist and social-democratic parties.

Given the ethnic mix in many countries in CEE it is perhaps no surprise that there are parties that appeal to ethnicity, especially as the representative of an ethnic minority, such as the Movement for Rights and Freedom (DPS) in Bulgaria. Although the provisions of the Bulgarian constitution mean it is formally not an ethnically based party, the party is seen in the eyes of voters as the representative of the country's ethnic Turkish population. The example of the DPS underlines two significant points linked to duration. Firstly, the appeal is ethnically rooted. In the large literature which has

discussed the utility of applying cleavage-based explanations to party politics in CEE<sup>26</sup> one deep societal division which has translated into a dividing line of politics is ethnicity.<sup>27</sup> Secondly, and linked, the party has taken a stance on a significant issue divide. Its party brand ensured it could project itself as the standard bearer defending the interests of the ethnic Turks in Bulgaria. In short and put simply, it has been seen in the eyes of voters as standing for something. For scholars of the longer-established democracies of Western Europe this seeming banalism is at the root both of the partisanship and party identification at the heart of enduring success of many established parties over many decades, especially on the moderate left, but also the key to explaining why many of these parties have seen their votes erode in more recent times.

Noam Lupu's analysis of the fate of parties in Argentina and Venezuela is illustrative here.<sup>28</sup> Lupu argued that economic crises *per se* did not lead to breakdown in electoral support, but that economic crisis was particularly likely to prove fatal when a party had also diluted its brand. The key here is that parties that are not seen in the eyes of the electorate as being a standard bearer on one side of a key issue divide lack an anchor to ensure they do not get blown away by the storms. Returning to the Slovak case above, by 2010 HZDS was a party which did not appear to stand for much that was distinctive. Its national appeal was squeezed by the Slovak National Party and the use of nationalist themes by Smer and its appeal to the losers of the transition had largely been seized by Smer in 2002 as that party projected itself as the opponents of the government's neoliberal agenda. All that was left was the fading charisma of the party's leader and founder, Vladimír Mečiar, who stubbornly refused to pass the leadership baton.

Parties which project themselves as the defenders of the interests of ethnic groups, rural electorates, pensioners, religious values, communist nostalgia etc. may not become major players on their political scene. They act as standard bearers of one side of an issue divide, often away from the political centre; dominating an electorally fruitful niche which breeds loyalty and partisanship amongst a section of the electorate and hence yielding a steady electoral return at the ballot box. In contrast to accounts of



niche parties in Western Europe<sup>29</sup> many of these niche appeals emerged at the beginning of democratic contestation i.e. not at a later stage than the more traditional left-right economic appeals.

Appeals to defend an ethnic group, the nation, rural electorates, religious affiliations, nostalgia for communist times etc. stand in stark contrast to the appeals often used by parties which prove to have shorter shelf-lives. For many new parties a central theme—in many cases *the* central theme—is corruption, often wrapped up in a broader “law and order” appeal.<sup>30</sup>

The characteristics of party newness and anti-corruption appeals have deep affinity: new parties can use the corruption question to turn their chief liability—their inexperience—into an asset. Likewise, anti-corruption appeals are more convincing coming from parties that do not need to defend past behaviour. The problem, however, is that ostentatiously *new* parties have difficulty remaining so. In societies where there are significant opportunities for corruption, or even in those in which the population *suspects* such opportunities, political leaders struggle to maintain their reputation for cleanliness. New and clean alternatives themselves become the corrupt politicians and without alternative appeals to fall back on, such parties simply collapse.

This observation suggests a significant alteration in the way we understand political competition. Current spatial models employ a distinction between positional dimensions, on which parties take different stances on relevant issues, and valence dimensions, on which parties occupy positions measured against a commonly held baseline such as competence or incorruptibility. Commonly discussed valence issues tend to emphasize personal or behavioural characteristics of parties which, it is often presumed, may be changed more easily than core beliefs about policy issues that define a party's identity. Leaving aside evidence that parties can shift their programmatic identities<sup>31</sup>, examples from CEE offer evidence that valence issues may also reflect a party's core identity and appeal to a specific segment of votes—those with strong aversion to corruption—just as much as national identity or economic issues appeal to specific segments of the population with their own politically-relevant preferences. Under these conditions some of the core differences between positional and valence issues dissolve and the result is

a cross-cutting “corruption” dimension. The opportunities for corruption (and public presumption that leaders will take advantage of those opportunities), however, means that while the dimension may endure from election to election, successful parties can rarely remain plausibly at the “anti-corruption” pole of the dimension, but since the anti-corruption voting base endures, each election period creates an incentive for a party to insert itself into the vacated “anti-corruption” space, and the affinities discussed above give significant advantage to a party that can portray itself as *new*.

Our focus in this article is on the parties that have endured since the early 1990s, but casting a glance at middle-aged parties that have endured and have the potential to survive for longer, it is striking how many of them such as Law and Justice in Poland or Smer-Social Democracy in Slovakia have taken a stance on a major issue divide. Both of these parties, however, do suffer from one notable weakness linked to leadership which we will return to below.

In a similar vein to our discussion of party organization, we can also underline something implicit in the preceding discussion: government participation is also an effect intensifier. When given access to government resources, new and “clean” parties often distinguish themselves as anything but, not because they are somehow necessarily worse than established parties, but because scandal undermines the *main* appeal of an anti-corruption party.

#### *Leadership: Charting a source between Scylla and Charybdis*

The combination of appeals which attract voters and persuade them to stay and organizational structures which cushion blows when parties experience downturns at the ballot box go a significant way towards explaining enduring, but the first vulnerability of party which Mair identified for Western Europe provides an important additional piece of the jigsaw.

At one level part of the explanation for endurance of parties like Fidesz in Hungary, the Slovene Democratic Party or the Centre Party in Estonia owe much to the appeal and charisma of their longstanding party leaders: Viktor Orbán, Janez Janša and Edgar Savisaar.<sup>32</sup> Leader-focused parties can endure for a significant period of time, as long

as biology permits. But that very strength can be a source of weakness. To illustrate how leadership feeds into party endurance, it is helpful to start by looking at the genesis of parties.

The reasons for the predominance of leader-focused parties are manifold. One lies in the nature of new party formation: many new parties begin life on the initiative of political leaders who have become frustrated with their ability to achieve their goals within another party. Since such efforts are most effective when coordinated by a single leader or a small, tightly organized group, there is a tendency for split and splinter parties to begin their lives already under the tight control of one or a few individuals. As leader-driven projects, these “parties of one man [or woman]” often contain few effective mechanisms for challenging the preferences of the leader. A second reason lies in the questions of party finance: parties may begin as the projects of wealthy individuals, or as the project of an individual with close ties to particular sponsors.

Strikingly, in light of the results of figures 1 and 2, generational shifts in the media environment may also contribute to the emergence of leader-driven parties since individual stories make for more compelling media narratives, especially if the leader already has a cache of celebrity. It is noteworthy - but not altogether surprising in the era of “got talent” celebrity - that an unusually high share of new party leaders in the past decade have been “in-front of the camera” media stars including Lithuanian game-show host Arunas Valinskas, Bulgarian talk-show host Volen Siderov, and Czech investigative journalist Radek John.

The emergence of leader-driven parties with low internal accountability has a number of consequences for volatility within party systems. To borrow from classical mythology, new parties are offered a choice between Scylla and Charybis: maximizing possible gain by risking everything (Charybis) or accepting certain losses to ensure survival (Scylla). Leader-driven parties tend to opt for Charybis. Although many leader-driven parties manage to endure and even to thrive, their Achilles heel is that their leaders have unpredictable tenures with some enduring for years (Slovakia’s Vladimír Mečiar) and some (such as Lithuania’s Valinskas) encountering fatal scandals shortly after

electoral triumph. When death, incapacity or scandal takes the leader of a leader-centric party, the result is usually catastrophic, because leaders tend not to lavish effort on the cultivation of potential successors who are also potential rivals. Indeed one of the best tests of party centralization is a negative answer to the question “Can you imagine [Party X] without [Leader Y]?” In many cases, the task is very difficult.

By avoiding plans for succession, leader-driven parties hasten the process of new party creation in several ways. Firstly, they create gaps for new party entry by inflexible readings of the electoral environment and are precluded from renewing their image in the eyes of voters or through leadership change and thus they become brittle. Parties without a single strong leader may prove to be messy affairs with unseemly intra-party conflict, but they have a better chance of reinventing themselves and recovering from poor election results or scandal or an aging voting base by opting for a new face well illustrated by the Czech Social Democrats’ response to its crisis in the mid-2000s when two leaders were replaced in quick succession. Secondly, they generate public figures to fill the gaps. The argument that splintering produces leader-driven parties, also works in the reverse direction: leader-driven parties produce splinters, as ambitious political leaders find themselves with no room for advancement and strike out on their own. One of the most notorious examples of this pattern is Slovakia’s HZDS, which produced at least seven discernible splinters, almost always headed by a frustrated party vice-chair or other prominent party figure(s).

Whilst the above discussion highlights the weaknesses of leader-centric parties in organizational terms, it is worth stressing that choosing the Charybis option can yield initial electoral bounty. Indeed, one of the tried and tested ingredients for garnering initial electoral success lies on the shelf marked ‘popular personality.’ The problem for parties is that the popularity of the party leader is often wrapped up with an appeal of purity (or at least a desire to root out corruption which we discuss below) and an appeal to deliver the goods. Appeals to purity, however, are difficult to maintain once a politician has had his/her hands on power. Party leaders can remain popular after a party’s sheen of newness has worn off, but for leaders to remain popular they need to

have delivered something tangible to their core electorate and they need to project themselves as the standard bearers of one side of a major issue divide.

### **The Survival of “Survival”?**

The search for some elixir that might explain the survival of Central and Eastern European parties not only helps to narrow down the causal factors, but also helps to address the broader reasons why not every party makes what once were fairly predictable choices. That parties seeking long-term survival should build organizations, stand for something durable and be ready to cut loose leaders who have stopped lifting and started dragging (and avoid entering government until ready to do so) would not have surprised most mid-20<sup>th</sup> century party creators, but these are not the efforts pursued by many of their early 21<sup>st</sup> century counterparts. The reasons lie not only with the parties but also with the parties’ environment and so it is useful to think about the broader context.

Thinking about time and duration with regard to political parties provoked van Biezen<sup>33</sup> to consider three sets of effects which provoke a series of further questions about party longevity:

1. *Generation effects*, which depend on the answer to the question “when you were born?” (and should hold irrespective of how old the year in which the question is asked)
2. *Period effects*, which depend on the answer to the question “what year is it?” (and should hold irrespective of the age of a party)
3. *Life-cycle effects*, which depend on the answer to the question: “how old are you?” (and should hold irrespective of the year in which the question is asked).

Each of these effects has its own telltale signs and each suggests a different causal mechanism. The parties of Central and Eastern Europe exhibit a distinct profile of effects that helps clarify the region’s overall trajectory:

The most striking results are signs of a generational effect, at least to the extent that the earliest cohort of post-Communist party systems whose relatively strong investment in

organization and long-lasting appeals appear to have endured over time in that cohort and may help explain their relatively long survival, while subsequent generations of parties engaged less in the same kind of party building. The roots of this difference are varied. Part of the difference lies in the circumstances of the early post-Communist experience: the strong party organizational structure of Communist parties taken on by many of their successors, the open field for mobilizing long-shelf-life issues such as ethnicity and religion, and the early impressions by many party founders that success could only be had by closely following Western political party models from the earlier era of mass parties. Later generations found fewer ready-made opportunities for organization and enduring appeals and saw less need for these efforts as new technologies facilitated quick, easy and cheap communication with prospective voters and nimble coordination among founders and activists.

Both generational and period effects rely on party responses to eternal pressures, but the period effects occur when *contemporary* external pressures overwhelm *past* pressures that previously shaped the party. The trend toward lightweight organization and less-durable appeals in newer parties shows clear generational effects in parties founded at that time, but there is less evidence that it has also had period effects on parties established earlier. The parties of the first generation tended to maintain their survival-enhancing characteristics rather than opting for the lightweight organization and less durable-appeals that later came into prevalence. (Since the maintenance of past characteristics may have been stronger among the survivors than among those that failed it is plausible that period effects did occur but that they did not enhance survival.)

Finally, there is the more complicated question of life-cycle effects. These resemble period effects in their assumption that parties do change, but life-cycle effects posit a different impetus, focusing not on external pressure but on internal imperatives related to organizational development. In van Biezen's own work on party organization she suggests that these may be the least likely,<sup>34</sup> but the examples above suggest that this less-traveled path can also play a fundamental role in overall party system development. Noteworthy here are the parties such as Slovakia's Smer and Bulgaria's GERB and to a certain extent Poland's PiS which actively sought out the characteristics

associated with the earlier party cohort. Relatively few parties appear to have been able to respond to these pressures for internal change, but some of those that did had a fundamental effect on their respective party systems, slowing down the cycle of new-party replacement, at least for a while. Whether those parties become permanent party system anchors, like the some of the parties of the earliest cohort, or merely temporary restraints will depend on their ability to sustain the organization and appeals that they have built and especially on their handling of the leadership question, the one area where Smer's Fico, GERB's Borrisov and PiS's Kaczyński (among others) have yet to opt for a more sustainable, "old-style" model.

### **Into the Woods: Party Survival and Population Dynamics**

It is no accident that van Biezen's model and subsequent analyses—including this one—adopt biological metaphors. Intentionally or not, scholarly literature on political parties often turns images borrowed from more immediate experience. We speak without hesitation about parties being born and dying, and we define party life cycles and the periods of conception, endurance and mortality. While it is important always to be aware that the map is not the territory, that the metaphor is not the matter at hand, a careful adaptation of these models from the physical and biological world can help to broaden our understanding and improve our subsequent explorations.

The processes of evolutionary biology alluded to by van Biezen and other life-cycle metaphors offers potentially useful insights into how party choices interact with the environment to produce the patterns we see in Central and Eastern Europe. Biologists classify species' survival strategies into two sets of related categories. Some species use a method that biologists call K-selection, producing only a few offspring but investing large amounts of attention to their upbringing. By discouraging infant mortality, this selection method tends to produce species with a survival pattern called Type I in which a high percentage survive infancy and die at an age close to the species maximum. Other species survive by a method known as r-selection, investing little in the survival of their offspring but producing extremely large numbers. The result of this method is usually is a survival pattern called Type-III (Type-II is reserved for

intermediate outcomes) which involves early death for the vast majority and survival (potentially very long-term survival) for a very few. Whereas the subjects of most studies on political parties follow a method akin to K-selection and have Type I survival patterns, it is the r-selection model and Type-III survival patterns that more closely characterize the older and newer parties in Central and Eastern Europe. In Type III species, furthermore, survival may increase substantially “after an individual reaches a certain age,” often once it has achieved a developmental milestone such as the significant “stairstep” drop in mortality that occurs when young crustaceans and molluscs survive long enough to develop hard outer shells,<sup>35</sup> or when parties survive long enough to develop regular procedures for changing leaders or adapting party appeals.

These patterns conform quite closely to the circumstances in which each type of strategy tends to emerge in natural systems: “K-selected organisms are adapted to environments that typically have a stable climate and little opportunity for rapid population growth” while “[m]ost r-selected species have an advantage in habitats that experience unpredictable disturbances, such as fire, floods, hurricanes, drought, or cold weather, which create new opportunities by suddenly reducing a population to low levels.”<sup>36</sup> Likewise, the model of forest dynamics for “regrowth following disturbance” as developed by Peet and Christensen bears remarkably close resemblance to post-Communist party development, with successive periods of establishment of large numbers of seedlings in open land followed by a thinning that drives out nearly all weaker plants, and transition periods in which the death of particular trees (“often the consequence of factors such as lightning, windthrow or disease”) creates a patch of light and soil resources becomes available within the forest. In this patch, new seedlings can become established, and finally a steady state in which all of the previous three processes occur simultaneously “in miniature.”<sup>37</sup>

Political party systems in Central and Eastern Europe show evidence of moving toward that last stage, a steady state in which a few longstanding old parties coexist with the coming and going of generations of fragile newcomers some of which may survive long enough to become firmly-established in their own right. Here the reality diverges from



the metaphor, however. Parties are not seedlings. Party leaders have the ability to make conscious choices even in the face of environmental pressures. Whether the balance shifts toward the young or the old will depend largely on whether party leaders decide to opt for the strategies of rapid growth and quicker death or the more limiting but also more sustainable strategies discussed here. If they opt for r-strategies and Type III survival curves, then the occasional natural deaths of the older parties will leave a political landscape forever dominated by the young.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, F. Casal Bértoa, "Parties, Regime and Cleavages," *East European Politics* 28 (2012): 452-472; J-E. Lane and S. Ersson, "Party System Instability in Europe: Persistent Differences in Volatility between West and East?" *Democratization*, 14 (2007): 92-110; P. Lewis, "Party Systems in Post-Communist Central Europe: Patterns of Stability and Consolidation," *Democratization*, 13 (2006): 562-583; S. Mainwaring and E. Zoco, "Political Sequences and the Stabilization of Interparty Competition: Electoral Volatility in Old and New Democracies," *Party Politics*, 13 (2007): 155-78; C. O'Dwyer, "What Accounts for Party System Stability? Comparing the Dimensions of Party Competition in Postcommunist Europe," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 66 (2014): 511-535; M. Tavits, "Party Systems in the Making: The Emergence and Success of New Parties in New Democracies," *British Journal of Political Science*, 38 (2008): 113-133.

<sup>2</sup> e.g. A. Sikk, "Newness as a Winning Formula for New Political Parties," *Party Politics* 18 (2012); S. Hanley, "Dynamics of New Party Formation in the Czech Republic 1996-2010: Looking for the Origins of a 'political Earthquake,'" *East European Politics* 35 (2012); E. Bakke and N. Sitter (2013): "Why Do Parties Fail? Cleavages, Government Fatigue and Electoral Failure in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary 1992-2012" *East European Politics* 29 (2013): 208-225; T. Haughton and K. Deegan-Krause, "Hurricane Season: Systems of Instability in Central and East European Party Politics" *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 29 (2015): 61-80

<sup>3</sup> Here taken to mean the 10 states from the region that entered the EU in 2004 and 2007, though nearly identical results can be found for Croatia.

<sup>4</sup> Haughton and Deegan-Krause, "Hurricane Season"

<sup>5</sup> J. Rovny and J. Polk "Stepping in the same river twice: Stability amidst change in Eastern European party competition", *European Journal of Political Research*, 56 (2017): 188-198.

<sup>6</sup> A. Sikk, "Newness".

<sup>7</sup> R. Rohrschneider and S. Whitefield *The Strain of Representation: How Parties Represent Diverse Voters in Western and Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Tavits "Party systems", 132.

<sup>9</sup> F. Casal Bértoa, K. Deegan-Krause and T. Haughton "The Volatility of Volatility: Assessing Uses of the Pedersen Index to Measure Changes in Party Vote Shares", Nottingham Interdisciplinary Centre for Economic and Political Research (2016),

<http://nicep.nottingham.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/2016-10-Casal-Bertoa-Deegan-Krause-Haughton.pdf>

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- <sup>10</sup> S. Mainwaring, S., A. España and C. Gervasoni, "Extra- and within-system electoral volatility" *Party Politics* (2016) Online First, doi: 10.1177/1354068815625229; E. N. Powell and J. A. Tucker, "Revisiting Electoral Volatility in Post-communist Countries," *British Journal of Political Science* 44 (2014): 123–47.
- <sup>11</sup> M. Kreuzer and V. Pettai, "Persistence and Decline versus Transience and Genesis: the Challenge of Analyzing Patterns of Party System Formation in the Baltics" (paper presented at the Joint Sessions of the European Consortium for Political Research, St. Gallen, Switzerland, 2011); Haughton and Deegan-Krause, "Hurricane Season".
- <sup>12</sup> The notion of "in current form" obviously raises possible points of contention since splits, mergers and name changes affect the date in question and since even scholars from the same country will disagree about what counts as a new party. See Casal Bértoa et al. "The Volatility of Volatility". The calculations here reflect the authors' assessment of party novelty. The calculations for Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia between 1990 and the mid-2000s derive from Kreuzer and Pettai, "Persistence and Decline"
- <sup>13</sup> Haughton and Deegan-Krause, "Hurricane Season"
- <sup>14</sup> For the Baltics states we use the data provided by Kreuzer and Pettai. Some might see more evidence of continuity than their figures show, but few would challenge the broad pattern the data produce in the figures.
- <sup>15</sup> Haughton and Deegan-Krause, "Hurricane Season"
- <sup>16</sup> P. Mair, "Continuity, Change and the Vulnerability of Party", *West European Politics* 12 (1989), 169-187
- <sup>17</sup> See, for example, P. Kopecky, "Developing Party Organizations in East-Central Europe", *Party Politics*, 1 (1995): 515-534; P. Mair *Party System Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); A. Szczerbiak "Testing Party Models in East-Central Europe: Local Party Organization in Postcommunist Poland", *Party Politics*, 5 (1999): 525-537.
- <sup>18</sup> M. Spirova, *Political Parties in Post-communist Societies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007)
- <sup>19</sup> Spirova, *Political Parties in Post-communist Societies*; M. Tavits, *Post-Communist Democracies and Party Organization* (Cambridge University Press, 2013) and R. Ibenskas "Activists or money? Explaining the electoral success and persistence of political parties in Lithuania." *Party Politics* 20 (2014): 879-889
- <sup>20</sup> I. van Biezen, P. Mair and T. Poguntke, "Going, going, . . . gone? The decline of party membership in contemporary Europe", *European Journal for Political Research*, 51 (2012): 24-56.
- <sup>21</sup> Tavits *Post-Communist Democracies*, 9
- <sup>22</sup> Tavits *Post-Communist Democracies*, 2
- <sup>23</sup> T. Haughton "Explaining the Limited Success of the Communist-Successor Left in Slovakia: the Case of the Party of the Democratic Left (SDL)", *Party Politics*, 10 (2004): 177-191
- <sup>24</sup> A. Innes "Party Competition in Postcommunist Europe: The Great Electoral Lottery" *Comparative Politics*, 35 (2002): 85-104
- <sup>25</sup> A. Sikk, *Highways to Power: New Party Success in Three Young Democracies*, (Tartu: Tartu University Press, 2006); S. Engler, "Corruption and Electoral Support for New Political Parties in Central and Eastern Europe" *West European Politics* 39, (2016): 278-304
- <sup>26</sup> R. Rohrschneider and S. Whitefield, 'Understanding Cleavages in Party Systems: Issue Position and Issue Salience in 13 Post-Communist Democracies', *Comparative Political Studies*, 42 (2009): 280-313.; S. Whitefield, Stephen 'Political Cleavages and Post-Communist Politics', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 5, (2002): 181-200; K. Deegan-Krause, 'Full and Partial Cleavages', *Handbook of Political Change in Eastern Europe*, edited by S. Berglund, J. Ekman, K. Deegan-Krause and T. Knutsen (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar): 33-50; B. Stanley, The Dynamics of Party-System Supply and Demand in Poland, 1997–2007. Cleavage Change or Shapeless Shifting?, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 66, No. 8: 1295-1322.
- <sup>27</sup> J. Rovny, 'Communism, Federalism, and Ethnic Minorities: Explaining Party Competition Patterns in Eastern Europe', *World Politics*, 66 (2014), pp. 669-708
- <sup>28</sup> N. Lupu, *Party Brands in Crisis: Partisanship, Brand Dilution, and the Breakdown of Political Parties in Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016)
- <sup>29</sup> B. Meguid *Party Competition Between Unequals: Strategies and Electoral Fortunes in Western Europe*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007)
- <sup>30</sup> Sikk, *Highways to Power*; A. Bågenholm, 'Do anti-corruption parties matter? - The Electoral Fate and Policy Impact of the Third Wave of Niche Parties in Central and Eastern Europe'. *QoG Working Paper* 2011:22. (2011)

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<http://www.qog.pol.gu.se/publications/workingpapers/2011/> [Accessed 10 April 2012]; Engler, "Corruption and Electoral Support"

<sup>31</sup> e.g. Z. Enyedi, 'The role of agency in cleavage formation', *European Journal of Political Research* 44 (2005): 697-720

<sup>32</sup> Savisaar's leadership of the Centre Party came to an end in December 2016.

<sup>33</sup> I. van Biezen, "On the Theory and Practice of Party Formation and Adaptation in New Democracies", *European Journal of Political Research*, 44 (2005): 147-174

<sup>34</sup> I. van Biezen, "On the Theory and Practice of Party Formation, 153

<sup>35</sup> J. Reece et al, *Campbell Biology* (San Francisco, CA: Pearson Benjamin Cummings 2012), 725; E.P. Odum and G. W. Barrett, *Fundamentals of Ecology*, 3rd Edition (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole, 2004), 249

<sup>36</sup>: Reece et al, *Campbell Biology*, 730.

<sup>37</sup> R.K. Peet and N.L. Christensen, "Tree Death: Cause and Consequence", *BioScience*, 37 (1987), 587.