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“Europeanisation” of Central Eastern European Party Systems

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Introduction

The study of the interactions between European integration and national party systems is a fast developing research field (Goetz and Hix 2000, Mair 2000, Lardrech 2002, Marks and Steenbergen 2004, etc.). Eastern Central Europe (ECE) has received less attention, however, despite the fact that the process of Europeanisation is likely to manifest itself more robustly in this region (Lewis forthcoming). Post-Communist party systems, on average, are fragile and fragmented, the prestige conferred by the association with Western political structures is a major electoral asset, and the parties tend to focus on the issue of national sovereignty. Transnational party federations play an important role in socialising Eastern European parties into the norms of particular party families (Pridham 1999).

Moreover, parties in Eastern Central Europe do not simply adapt to the process of European integration: they are part of it. Membership in European Union was widely regarded as a major societal goal already before the establishment of the present day political parties. While in the West the principal question is how the new challenges posed by European integration will be answered by long-standing ideological traditions, in the East the very first programs were drafted with an eye on the accession, seen already at that time as imminent.

Exactly because of this early influence, however, it is not easy to separate the specific impact of EU from the influence of the international environment in general. The present paper reviews those areas where the parties and party systems are most likely to be transformed due to the ongoing integration process. Most of these areas are applicable to all party systems, whether East or West. But the consequences may be specific in the new democracies. Moreover, there is likely to be a variation also across the region. The paper is aimed at discussing a list of potential consequences, and providing a few illustrative examples.

I see eleven areas where the interaction between national and European arenas may impact parties and party systems: the power of parties within the political system, the salience of the EU issue, the parties' position vis-à-vis European integration, the structure of mass attitudes, the pattern of party competition, fragmentation and polarisation of the party system, the relative strength of party families, transnational cooperation, party organisation, and, finally, the accuracy of political representation on integration-related attitudes.

The power position of parties

Consolidated democracies are, by and large, party-centred democracies, particularly in Western Europe. Therefore the deepening of interaction with Europe may contribute to the strengthening of the power of parties in the new democracies. But the opposite scenario is also imaginable. The privileged status of governments and interest groups and the uncertain status of political parties within EU may actually weaken ECE parties. The elitist nature of EU politics may contribute to a general alienation from political parties, the classical channels of representative democracies.

Time has been too short to evaluate this aspect of change. Turnout is decreasing in the region, and the EP elections were "boycotted" by more citizens than in Western Europe. But these developments had no discernible impact on the status of parties and interest groups have not become more influential in the region.

The salience of the EU issue

Membership in EU turns domestic players into EU actors. The decisions made in Strasbourg and Brussels impact the life of the citizens of the new member states as much, if not even more, than of the citizens of the EU15. Therefore, it is highly probable that the salience of EU-related issues will increase in East Central Europe. But again, expecting the opposite development is not without foundation either. The most consequential question concerning the EU, whether a country joins it or not, has been decided. All subsequent decisions carry a

smaller weight. As the stakes became smaller, so may the interest vanish, decreasing the salience of Europe in party competition.

Given the marginal role EU issues played at the EP elections (Chan 2004), it is fair to say that the salience of the EU issue was and remained low. But this was so largely because accession was the main EU issue, and a consensus for a yes prevailed across the region. EU integration was seen as a civilisational imperative. But since the tensions came to the surface within the EU itself, parties have a wider range of options available. This development is likely to provide more room for a genuine debate and for a growing importance of EU issues in party competition.

Position vis-à-vis the European integration

In case parties do have a clear position towards the EU, this position may be determined either by the parties' ideological position on issues relevant for integration (economic liberalism, nationalism, etc.) or by their relations to European party families, or by the strategic position within the party system. Only the first option implies a principled position. The existence of a communist and of a nationalist party family in the region creates opportunity for this sort of ideological opposition to emerge.

The second is typical of those parties that see enough benefit from the association with a European party federation to adopt the federation's position. Given the high prestige of Europarties in East Central Europe, one expects relatively many parties to be influenced by similar considerations. The adaptation may happen on other issues as well, but it is most likely to happen on the EU issue.

Finally, the third option implies that a party's position on EU varies depending on the temporary configuration of the domestic competition. Typically dominant parties are not expected to emphasize the EU issue or to occupy radical position in the debate, while minor and opposition parties, particularly whose main competitor has a built-in advantage on the principal domestic issues, are much more likely to do so. Anti-system parties and parties that represent social groups directly affected by EU policies (e.g., peasants) are also likely to develop a radical profile on European issues.

But it is misleading to model the attitudes towards EU either as a dichotomy (pro and against) or as a continuum (more or less). Parties coming from different traditions see Europe differently: as “Christian”, or as “Welfare” or as “Cosmopolitan Europe”, for example. There is probably more possibility to project one’s value system onto EU than in the West. A number of major parties (ODS, Fidesz, PiS) developed a rather conditional and complex attitude on the subject, distancing themselves from Euroenthusiasm.

According to Bielasiak (2004) the level of Euroskepticism may be linked to the degree of contestation, since parties under intense competitive pressure may turn more attention to the European issue. The Hungarian case, with a fairly competitive structure and a relatively low salience of the European issue seems to contradict this expectation. But in fact as the degree of competitiveness increased throughout the last decade, measured by the margin between the two frontrunners, so did the polarization on the attitude towards the EU.

Structure of mass attitudinal dimensions

The overall level of ideological crystallization among masses is relatively high in the region, at least higher than in Latin America (Kitschelt 2003). The example of Western Europe and European Union is likely to have something to do with that (although note that Kitschelt provides different explanation). The ideological oppositions within the EU are often used as standards of “normal” politics in the discourse of Eastern Central European discourse. The gravity of European patterns may undermine those divides that are specific to the region. For example, membership in a community where communism is not an issue may weaken the salience of the anti-communist divide. The decline of this attitudinal cleavage in the last years (see Bulgaria, Lithuania, Poland, etc.) seems to confirm this tendency, although that can surely have purely domestic reasons as well.

EU can theoretically have an impact on any of the ideological dimensions, but the most obvious question is how the attitude towards European integration becomes related with other attitudinal dimensions. The literature suggests that the ideological correlates of this dimension depend on the particular socio-political context of the nation states (Van der Eijk and Franklin 2004, Dauderstädt 2004). The variance across Eastern Central Europe may very be a function of whether cultural or economic issues dominate the domestic agenda (cf. Marks et al. 2004).

The dimensions of political values and attitudes of masses and elite are well mapped for the old member states and for the European Parliament (Thomassen and Schmitt 1999, Hix and Lord 1997, Hooghe and Marks 2001, etc.), and one of the emerging findings seems to be that opposition to integration comes increasingly from neo-liberal circles. The existing embryonic research on ECE indicates, however, that Euroscepticism is typically fuelled by authoritarianism and nationalism, while neo-liberal ideas are often glued to cultural libertarianism, cosmopolitanism and Euroenthusiasm (Andersen 1998, Kitschelt et al. 1999). The conflict between neo-liberal and social-democratic EU agendas (Hooghe and Marks 2001) is likely to materialise only in those ECE countries where economic issues dominate the domestic agenda.

Since after the regime change anti-communism was one of the principal attitudinal cleavages in the region, it is particularly interesting to follow the relationship of this issue with the EU issue. If anti-communism is part of a clerical-nationalist package (like in Hungary) then the relationship between anti-communism and anti-EU is likely to become positive. Where large unreformed communist parties exist, the relationship will most likely be negative.

The geopolitical status and the ethnic structure seems to be highly consequential for the combination of attitudes. Where large Russian minority exists (the Baltics), the anti-Russian and the pro-EU feelings tend to produce positive correlation, although the most anti-Russian nationalists are likely to criticise EU.

The accession to EU may make the contact with kin groups living beyond the borders either easier or more difficult, depending on whether the neighbouring country also joins the Union. In the former case nationalists are likely to be more positive, in the latter more negative about the EU.

Patterns of party competition

The preferences of the international actors within the EU system and the position of parties and voters concerning the EU may also trigger a change in the coalition preferences of the parties. The coalition alternatives are constrained by the international environment, and the EU institutions are in particularly good position to exert pressure on domestic actors not to

ally with extremist, particularly extreme right, forces. Beyond that, however, the logic of choosing coalition partners seems to be mainly determined by domestic considerations. At the same time, the widespread consensus concerning the issue of accession, particularly in countries like Bulgaria and Romania, can provide basis for hitherto unimaginable coalitions, and lead therefore to more cooperation.

Europe could help the party systems in the region to consolidate, but it can also undermine the little stability that exists. The association with European party families seems to have a positive effect, the introduction of new forms of contestation (EP election, selection of EU Commissioners, etc.) causes rather turbulence. The consequences of these elections and selections is likely to be larger than in the "Old" Europe because parties tend to have more tenuous links with their voters and with each other, and because the positions in Strasbourg and Brussels have a higher relative value.

Lewis (forthcoming) indeed lists a number of examples indicating the presence of a destabilizing tendency. After the EP election, for example, a number of PMs resigned in East Central Europe. Potentially, however, the ruling political elites could benefit from the EP election in treating them as dress rehearsal for the national election: collecting information about the voters' preferences and experimenting with new campaign techniques. If so, the EP elections may lead to more responsiveness, flexibility and adaptability on behalf of the (ruling) parties.

Fragmentation

The fragmentation of the party systems is affected directly by the EU if new parties appear or old ones disappear because of their attitude towards the EU. None of this is very probable, as the Western European example shows. But it is certainly a possibility, and not only for the anti-EU side, as often expected. In the Czech Republic there is already a new party with the *raison d'être* of supporting integration.

Splits are somewhat more likely to occur. In ECE a large number of parties exist that have, from a Western point of view, idiosyncratic ideological platforms. Statist conservatives and authoritarian left wing parties are cases in point. The integration of these parties into the

European Parliament is likely to place them under pressure. Those party leaders who try to keep together authoritarian nationalists and neo-liberals on the right or social democrats and communists on the left face new tensions, which may result in factionalisation or splits.

But the links to EU federation may actually decrease fragmentation. European parties discourage electorally harmful rivalry between parties belonging to the federation. The leadership of these federations, together with the rich German and Dutch foundations, possess the incentives necessary for exerting pressure on the parties to cooperate and/or to, eventually, unite.

Polarisation

If the technocratic and consensual governance of EU (Mair 2000, Agh 2004) becomes indeed incorporated into the national political systems, we must expect decreasing polarisation. The EP elections may have a similar effect. In many East Central European countries the public regards the MEPs as the ambassadors of the country, who are supposed to work together for the national interest. Where this approach prevails, the EP election may be dominated by a fight over competence, and the contrast among ideological positions may have smaller relevance.

But the negative attitude of the EU actors towards certain domestic parties may contribute to higher level of polarisation as well. The citizens know that if a party of communist or nationalist background wins the election the entire country may be ostracised. The higher stakes may produce more bitter campaign and more intensive competition.

Relative strength of party families

Most evidently, EU integration may help families having different attitudes towards the EU to different degree. Integration is most in line with the values of liberal and cosmopolitan parties (Handerson 2001). They can capitalize on that, but it is equally possible that accession actually undermines their legitimacy.

Some observers record an increase of populism and extremism due to the policies of the EU (Grzymała-Busse and Innes 2003), but in fact there are very few examples (most notably the

rise of the Polish Self-defense) that illustrate this phenomenon. Otherwise radical nationalist parties seem to be adversely affected. Some of them lose popularity because are regarded as not compatible with EU norms and as lacking coalition potential. They are, therefore, abandoned by their more rational voters. Others go too far in satisfying the taste of the European elite, and consequently lose their appeal among the more radical supporters. Ironically, parties like Vladimir Meciar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia and Corneliu Vadim Tudor's Greater Romania Party seem to suffer from both: they did radically change their discourse towards a more moderate one, but the result was the loss of credibility.

The centre-left and centre-right are likely to be shaped to a different degree by the Western ideological patterns. Eastern European left wing politicians are rather comfortable with the social and cultural program of Western Social Democracy. The right-wing spectrum is somewhat more ambivalent. Since the right is more differentiated on the European scale as well, Eastern Central Europe is expected to reproduce the Western pattern: more united left, more fragmented right.

Transnational cooperation

This difference between the left and the right is likely to be mirrored in the intensity of international cooperation. At the same time, the ascendance of the People's Party in the European Parliament may alter this trend, making the imitation of EPP a particularly attractive option. The role of German parties and their foundations seems to be particularly consequential in assimilating, or at least socialising, East Central European parties into western patterns.

As in all aspects discussed above, the parties are expected to exploit the structures offered by EU in order to attain domestic success. Therefore the choice between Europarties will be motivated as much by ideological sympathies as by opportunistic reasons. The search European partners in case of the UDF and MRP in Bulgaria, and the Democratic Party, the Greater Romania Party and the Liberals in Romania, or the Centre party in Estonia attest the significance of rational calculations.

Party organisation

The diffusion of organisational techniques is expected to speed up after enlargement. The internal hierarchies may be affected by the growing informational asymmetry between leaders and members and by the appearance of EU politicians within the parties. These developments do not lead, however, necessarily towards more hierarchy. East Central European MEPs are likely to be less under the control of their national headquarters because of the lower salience of the EU issues in national politics. As a result, East Central European parties may become more stratachic.

The import of techniques that are associated with general democratic norms (gender quota, internal referenda) may also have consequences for the internal balance of power. But given that there is no “conditionality ” concerning organisational matters (nor, for that matter, concerning anything in party politics), the elites are likely to adopt these techniques if their position is not threatened by them.

Political representation

There seem to be sharply contradicting assessments concerning whether elites and constituencies converge or diverge on the European issue. Taggart and Szczerbiak (2001) found a large discrepancy between party and population based Euroscepticism in the region, but their analysis was not based on the contrast of party positions and the position of the parties’ own voters. Other studies (eg. Mattila and Raunio 2005) found Eastern European parties to represent their voters more accurately than their Western counterparts. If this is indeed so, it is rather surprising, also because in Western Europe the congruence between elites and voters is rather high. (Marks et al 2002.)

As far as the intra-regional variance is concerned, I expect the degree of correspondence in the ECE to depend on the significance of nationalism and authoritarianism in the party competition - the larger their weight, the higher the degree of congruence. The attitudes of the elites is expected to be more policy-related, while the attitudes of the voters, though to a decreasing extent, is expected to be holistic. Left-right identity is likely to constrain only elite attitudes, while authoritarianism is likely to be relevant at both mass and elite levels. At the

moment most probably strong issue leadership prevails, but the frequency of voter-driven adjustments is expected to increase.

Concluding notes

European Union is both an actor and an environment. Vis-à-vis the parties it is more often the second, since the EU institutions are not supposed to directly address the national parties and party systems. As an environment it is not easily distinguishable from other elements of the international context. This is particularly so in East-Central Europe, where globalisation, Americanisation and Europeanisation appeared together.

At the same time, parties react to various elements of European integration. If these reactions have consequences for their position on other issues, for their electoral chances, the profiles of the electorates, their inter-party relations, etc., then one can claim that EU shapes the party systems. It is too early to judge whether this has indeed happened in Central Eastern Europe. The paper tried to show that there are many potential effects and that these effects may go in different directions. Obviously systematic, hitherto missing data collection is required to come up with definite answers, but the paper has hopefully provided ground for the generation of hypotheses.

The “Europeanisation” research tradition assumes the existence of an EU dynamics, and equates Europeanisation with the incorporation of this dynamics into domestic political life (Ladrech 1994, Radaelli 2000). This sounds as an acceptable definition, but the changes induced by the European integration go beyond the process of incorporation, and the European Union does not seem to produce one single identifiable logic. Definitely not in the realm of party politics. Therefore, studying the interaction between national and European arenas one must be explicitly open to unintended and counter-intuitive processes and to diverging tendencies across the nation states

This is so because European structures and norms are as much as opportunities as constrains. Politicians incorporate new structures and discourses in order to advance their own goals and interests. Their capacity of exploiting the new opportunities depends on the already existing domestic institutional barriers and interpretative frameworks. While the stimulus may be the

same, the party systems of the region are expected to give very different answers that may lead to a growing divergence within the post-communist countries and, in some paradoxical cases, a growing difference between some of these countries and Western European political patterns.

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