The Adaptation Strategies of Post-Communist Political Parties: An Introduction

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Starting with the third decade of post-communism, the political landscape of the world that once belonged to the Soviet bloc or its satellites has been marked by important transformations at institutional and individual levels. So far, relatively little is known about how political parties respond to recent challenges and developments in politics and societies. This issue of the *European Review* seeks to address this gap in the literature and pursues theoretical, empirical and methodological objectives. The collection of articles seeks to outline a few theoretical models of adaptation to the political realities, to identify and explain various ways in which political parties respond to challenges and continue to perform their function of representation, and to measure variables and concepts that were previously approached only from a normative or descriptive perspective

New Challenges for Political Parties

In the first two decades, the politics of the post-communist world that once belonged to the Soviet bloc or its satellites was characterized by several common features. Some of the most prominent features were a relatively unstable political competition with high levels of electoral volatility and few political actors with continuous presence in parliament, the high personalization of politics, the cartelization of politics, incomplete implementation of the rule of law, and the widespread existence of corruption including the use of patronage and clientelism (Gherghina 2014a; Grzymala-Busse 2008; Kopecký and Spirova 2011; Lewis 2001; Sikk 2005; van Biezen 2003; Webb and White 2007). All these developments raised a broad range of challenges to the process of democratization or democratic consolidation and of political competition or representation in particular.

Starting with the third decade of post-communism, the political landscape has been marked by important transformations both at institutional and individual levels. At institutional level, new political parties emerged and many adopted a populist rhetoric to meet and fuel the critical attitudes of citizens towards the political establishment. While similar political parties existed also in the past in the region (Minkenberg 2002; Mudde 2005), the diversity of anti-democratic or anti-elitist parties in recent times is increasing dramatically and challenges the usual principles of representation (Gherghina and Miscoiu 2014; Minkenberg 2015; Pirro 2014, 2015; Soare and Tufiş 2018). The rise and fall of populist parties not only increased the competitiveness of elections, but also encouraged mainstream parties to change their approach. In this period, established political actors faced an important erosion of support, losing elections or not being able to join coalition governments as often as they used to. A supplementary indicator of this dynamic at the institutional level is the existence of several early elections in the region.

At the individual level, a particular type of political leadership with authoritarian tendencies has a strong appeal to the public in several countries. This happens at a higher rate than before and is highly convergent with a nationalist discourse (Batory 2016; Fomina and Kucharczyk 2016; Hanley and Vachudova 2018). It happens along with the personalization of politics, a process through which persons – usually the party leaders – are associated with political institutions, they become recognizable faces and anchors of identification. At the same time, citizens made extensive use of various ways to engage in politics. The relatively large number, especially when compared to the previous decades – of demonstrations, protests, petitions or citizen-driven referendums (bottom-up) is an accurate reflection of a greater appetite for involvement in the decision-making process (Morel and Qvortrup 2017; Qvortrup 2014).

Adaptation Strategies

These two major types of challenges are likely to affect political parties. In most post-communist countries party politics appears to be the only game in town (Enyedi and Toka 2007; Gherghina 2014a). This happens in spite of a large number of characteristics that would create the opposite expectation: voters have low levels of confidence in parties and politicians, the levels of partisan loyalty are minimal, the membership rates are minimal, and the patterns of competition quite unstable (Enyedi and Casal Bertoa 2011; Gherghina 2014a; Millard 2004; Rose and Mishler 1998). Political parties continue to be key actors in politics through their functions of interest aggregation and representation. An extensive body of literature reflects the ways in which parties respond to internal or external stimuli in the attempt to increase their likelihood of survival in the political arena. One of the first major challenges was the loss of social anchorage over time, reflected in lower membership rates and voter dealignment. Political parties turned to the state to compensate for this loss (Katz and Mair 1995) and thus a new model of party organization

emerged. In general, the environment in which political parties operate is an important driver for their adaptation. Earlier research has shown that parties often change their organization and programmes as a result of electoral loss or economic difficulties (Burgess 2003; Mair *et al.* 2004).

A particular instance involving the party organization is the attempt of political parties to respond to increasing pressure to democratize their candidate or leadership selection processes. These pressures consisted mainly of demands from their members and partially of alternative models from competitors. As a result, many parties introduced primaries that involve a large number of members deciding the candidates for public office or the holder of the highest position in the party (Hazan 1997; Hazan and Rahat 2010; Hopkin 2001; Sandri *et al.* 2015). Related to the idea of inclusiveness, many political parties provide an extensive number of rights to their members (Gherghina 2014b; Gherghina and von dem Berge 2017; Scarrow 2015). This strategy has been the result of external relations developed by political parties with other institutions (e.g. the presence in broader European party families determined interactions with parties from other countries and access to alternative models of organization) or of members' demands.

Many challenges are related to the increased social complexity of modern societies (for a thorough review of these issues, see Lawson and Poguntke 2004). Poguntke and Webb (2005) illustrate how one reaction of political parties to the internationalization of politics is personalization. Through this process they can use their position in national politics to maintain and augment their control over what happens on a territory. In performing their functions, political parties also adapt to the messages they receive from the electorate. They adjust their policy agenda according to the policy issues that are prioritized by citizens (Ezrow *et al.* 2011; Spoon and Klüver 2014) or to the opinions expressed by the public (Adams *et al.* 2004; Williams and Spoon 2015). At the same time, political parties adapt their messages also relative to the competition not only to the electorate. The most common form of adaptation is that of mainstream parties that face an increasing challenge from the fringe parties on salient topics for society. For example, earlier studies show how mainstream parties, especially those in opposition are likely to follow the agenda set by the niche parties in an attempt to gain electoral support (van de Wardt 2015).

The Contributions of this issue of the *European Review*

All these adaptation strategies have been observed for previous challenges especially in the established democracies. However, relatively little is known about how political parties respond to recent challenges and developments in the politics of new democracies or transition countries. This issue seeks to address this gap in the literature and aims to achieve three scholarly objectives at theoretical, empirical and methodological levels. First, at theoretical level, the collection of articles attempts to outline a few theoretical models of adaptation to the political realities.

This topic is often surrounded by discussions referring to empirical matters much more than around general arguments and theoretical explanatory models. One of the issue's aims is to enrich the theoretical debate about the validity and applicability of old theories or the emergence of new theories in explaining the adaptation strategies of post-communist parties. In addition, new theoretical avenues are explored to provide important bases for further research.

Second, at empirical level, the issue strives to identify and explain various ways in which political parties respond to challenges and continue to perform their function of representation. The contributions highlight a great variety of responses ranging from a shift in political discourse or the adoption of a new campaigning strategy to organizational developments. The articles cover a broad range of countries (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Kyrgyzstan, Lithuania and Romania) and focus both on mainstream and fringe political parties. Such a mix of empirical evidence from various political settings sheds light on the features of contemporary party politics.

Third, from a methodological perspective, some of the articles propose a few ways to measure variables and concepts that were previously approached only from a normative or descriptive perspective. Three examples are the type of discourse, cheating elections and the party leadership. There is a balance of qualitative and quantitative analyses in the articles, which rely heavily on primary data collection, thus bringing an important contribution to the study of political leadership.

Structure and Content

The issue combines contributions in the form of comparative perspectives across countries with contextualized case studies. The first drafts of all papers had been presented at the Workshop on Voters, Parties and Leaders in the Post-Communist World, organized by Södertörn University in Stockholm (September 2018). The first article of the issue deals with the translation of party pledges into coalition agreements in the Czech Republic, with a focus on their full or partial adoption. The article explores the explanatory power of consensual pledges, voter issue salience and party characteristics for the effect on the dependent variable. The analysis uses an original dataset of narrow pledges of Czech coalition parties in three governments between 2006 and 2013.

The second contribution analyses the populist rhetoric about political representation in Lithuania. Data come from the 2016 election manifestos and from party websites between April 2016 and September 2017. The qualitative content analysis reveals that populists define representation through references to common moral values and constant communication with citizens. This helps them create a common political identity between themselves as representatives and citizens. The third article analyses the role of the parliamentary opposition in Hungary, a country that has recently been in the spotlight for its de-democratization. The study seeks to explain why opposition parties are unable to offer a credible alternative and remain weak both at the local and the national level. The main reason for this situation is the

process of cartelization, which allows fringe parties, such as the Dog with Two-Tails, to become popular

The article of Grad and Marian focuses on the electoral campaign conducted by the most popular party in Romania, the Social Democratic Party, in the 2016 legislative election. Although their previous electoral campaigns brought electoral victories, the party changed its strategy for the most recent election. This article aims to understand why this change occurred, especially because it did not seem to be necessary. It accounts for three main variables: experiential learning, the role of a new party leader and the use of new opportunities. The fifth article of the issue looks at a different type of change, i.e. the fraud practices of the parties during election day. Sheranova's article analyses the e-voting rigging at the 2016 local elections to Osh city Council in Kyrgyzstan. E-voting was introduced to ensure fair and democratic elections against the most common election frauds such as vote buying, carousel voting and group voting. The analysis reveals the existence of strategies to trick the new electoral system: avoiding cross-checking of manual and automated counting, transformation of bribery into 'vote auctioning' and strengthening the tribal identity under conditions of e-voting.

The last two contributions address the changes in party organization. Gherghina's article compares the ways in which party members and experts evaluate leaders on the transactional–transformational continuum. The analysis focuses on eight parliamentary parties in Romania and Bulgaria, covering 19 party leaders and 33 terms over a period of 15 years (2004–2018). The results indicate important differences in the assessment of party leaders, with members having more heterogeneous opinions and seeing them more transformational in comparison to experts. Bankov's contribution seeks to understand why one of the communist successor parties continues to enjoy electoral support almost three decades after the regime change. It focuses on the typical case of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) and uses semi-structured interviews with party cadres and independent researchers. The findings reveal that political parties' stable territorial distribution has faced important challenges since 2010.

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