



The Nationalization of political parties and party systems in post-communist Eastern Europe

Guido Tiemann

Institute for Advanced Studies, Department of Political Science, Vienna, Austria

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ABSTRACT

Party system nationalization is a crucial aspect of political competition. The territories of Eastern Europe have often been characterized by outstanding levels of territorial heterogeneity. However, during and after World War II ethnic cleansing and forced migration resulted in more homogeneous nation states, and these trends were significantly reinforced by bureaucratic, centralized communist rule. I present a systematic empirical assessment of party and party system homogeneity or heterogeneity in post-communist Eastern Europe and will discuss some major macrosociological and institutional factors determining the degree of party and party system nationalization such as the political consequences of social diversity and political cleavages, legacies of the communist regimes, electoral systems, and federalism.

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1. The nationalization of politics

Party system nationalization is a crucial aspect of political competition. By highly nationalized party systems, I am referring to those in which the significant parties' vote shares do not differ much from one regional area, notably an electoral district, to another. In contrast, regionalized party systems are characterized by a substantial variance of the major parties' vote shares across the various regions constituting the respective national polities.

From a historical perspective, Eastern Europe has often been characterized by a striking level of territorial heterogeneity. Numerous weak national states were created from the ruins of the Habsburg Empire following World War I. Many of these states were ethnically and socially diverse. Consider, for instance, the Hungarian minorities spread all over the region after the Trianon Treaty. While Central and Eastern Europe were some of the most diverse regions in ethnic, social, religious, and linguistic terms, the picture dramatically changed with the outbreak of World War II. Above all, ethnic cleansing and expulsion resulted in more homogeneous, yet still weak and dependent, nation states. Furthermore, the territories of Eastern Europe succumbed to bureaucratic, centralized communist rule. The peoples of Eastern Europe were confronted with centralizing communist political systems that aimed at radically leveling and standardizing their societies.

In political science, the territoriality of politics has been a cornerstone of historical assessments of nation-building and the development of mass democracy in Western Europe.¹ Party system nationalization as a dependent variable has been explored by students of the historical evolution of political cleavages (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967), of electoral systems (Cox, 1999), or of

¹ Most important were the seminal contributions by Lipset and Rokkan (1967) and Rokkan and Urwin (1982). However, with the exception of some studies focusing on spatial issues in U.S. party politics, for instance the concept of "sectionalism" Schattschneider (1960), very little systematic empirical work has been published. Stokes (1965, 1967) was the first to analyze the nationalization of the U.S. party system applying sophisticated methodological and statistical tools ("the variance components model").

federalism (Chhibber and Kollman, 1998, 2004). Scholars observing political transitions of the “third wave” have defined nationalization and institutionalization as major criteria of party system consolidation (Mainwaring and Scully, 1995). As an independent variable, the nationalization of party systems structures national political competition, determines the government’s ability to pursue collective policy goals, is a catalyst for secessionist tendencies, and exerts a significant influence on the impact electoral systems may place on party systems (Sartori, 1986).

In this article, I focus on the first perspective, the analysis of nationalization issues as a dependent variable. Regarding the empirical basis of the analysis, I have selected eleven post-communist countries guided by the principles of a “most similar systems design” (Lijphart, 1971, 1975): Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, and Ukraine. Conceptually, my focus on Eastern Europe is justified by the peculiarities of the “double” intertwined transition in the political sphere and in “stateness” that they display. Empirically, the degree of party system nationalization exhibits considerable variation across the selected countries and time periods under analysis.

The subsequent line of arguments proceeds in three successive steps: First, I review some major historical, sociological, and institutional arguments (Section 2). Having clarified my theoretical assumptions, I turn to a discussion of the issue of proper empirical measurement of the nationalization/regionalization issue. Moreover, I comment on the data and sources while providing descriptive empirical information on the nationalization of party systems in eleven selected East European countries (Section 3). The ensuing section systematically presents evidence on the empirical links between party and/or party system nationalization and the major explanatory variables (Section 4). The final section concludes and outlines some promising avenues for further research (Section 5).

2. Theoretical arguments on party and party system nationalization

In the theoretical section, I review four major theoretical strands that may be employed as explanations for the nationalization or regionalization of party systems in post-communist Eastern Europe: (i) I argue that the cleavage-driven explanation that has been cogently argued and empirically shown by Caramani (2000) cannot be applied to the analysis of post-communist politics. (ii) Instead, I show that post-communist party systems are still predominantly affected by communist *Anciens Régimes* and their historical legacies. (iii) I also control for electoral coordination within and linkage across electoral districts formalized by Cox (1999), and (iv) the political consequences of federalism as proposed by Chhibber and Kollman (2004).

2.1. Cleavages and voter-party linkages

To date, Caramani (2000, 2004) has provided the most extensive analysis of party system nationalization. Both his theoretical argument and empirical research are deeply rooted in the long-term historical developments of West European electorates. Caramani builds upon the historical, comparative analysis of political cleavages. Essentially, preindustrial cultural cleavages, such as the instance of religious, ethnolinguistic, and urban-rural cleavages, are supposed to be principal causes of fragmented, regionalized party systems. In contrast, political cleavages that originated from industrialization, most notably the conflicts between labor and capital, liberal and conservative world-views, and the overarching left–right dimension, exert a homogenizing influence on party systems. As a consequence, the general trend toward the emergence of nationalized party systems in the early twentieth century is explained by the shift from territorial toward functional cleavages, while remaining differences in the degree of party system nationalization are attributed to persistent distinctions between the major countries of Western Europe. Empirically, Caramani (2000, 2004) builds upon an unparalleled wealth of comparative information on district-level electoral returns taken from seventeen West European countries. The period of time covered by his analysis includes more than 180 years, beginning with the first fully documented election in Norway in 1815, and ending with the most recent elections up until 1998.

However, only part of the argument can be fruitfully applied to the analysis of party system nationalization in Eastern Europe (for a systematic account cf. Mair, 1997). I briefly review some major contextual differences which set apart established democracies and post-communist countries: First of all, in comparison to established democracies, the electorate of newly democratized countries are far more open and more available for political competition; they also tend to be more volatile and more uncertain. These differences are in many respects due to discrepancies in the mode of democratization in West and East European countries. In Western Europe, democratization meant the extension of the right to participate in regimes in which the principle of political contestation had already been established. However, in Eastern Europe democratization meant establishing the principle of contestation in systems that had already introduced formal elements of public participation. I argue that these differences in the mode of transition prevent a substantial, long-term “freezing” of party alternatives comparable to Western European experiences and the hypothesis presented by Lipset and Rokkan (1967).

Secondly, these differences in the mode of transition also lead to unstable electoral constituencies and shaky party foundations. Post-communist party systems are less likely to be underpinned by strong political cleavage structures. This is, however, not to say, as suggested by some “tabula rasa hypotheses” (Evans and Whitefield, 2000), that East European electorates are totally homogeneous or that they lack any differentiation based on social stratification, ethnicity, religion, *et cetera*. There are many lines of social division and/or political conflict that are (or may become) the basis of programmatically

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