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The Party System in Central Europe after 20 Years (Standard or Exceptional?)¹

Michal Kubát

Abstract: *This article is a brief consideration of the state of the party system in Central Europe, in the sense of its position in wider theoretical and comparative contexts of democracy as such and within Western European models. Does Central Europe differ from Western Europe? Is Central European democracy, including the political party system, qualitatively different from Western European democracy? This text first examines the issue of the consolidation of democracy in Central Europe, then explores the relationships between the consolidation of democracy and the political party system in the region and finally tries to find an answer to the question of the standard or exceptional nature of Central European democracy and the Central European political party system in relation to Western Europe. The result of this examination is the finding of an absence of qualitative difference between Central and Western Europe in terms of the aspects referred to above.*

Keywords: *parties and party systems, democratic consolidation, Central Europe*

Introduction

There is doubtless no need to convince the follower of expert conference contributions and reader of academic political science texts of the significance of the party system in current politics. Many political scientists, starting with Maurice Duverger, have for a long time been referring to and demonstrating the fact that the party system forms the basis of political regimes, that it is the main factor of differentiation between them. The type of party system determines the type of political regime. The significance of the party system has been demonstrated universally, i.e. to a certain extent it relates to any political regime – democratic or undemocratic. In terms of democracies, this can include parliamentary, presidential or semi-presidential and so on.²

The importance of the political party system is understandably also reflected in the investigation of politics in Central European countries, which roughly 20

¹ This text is the written version of a presentation given at *Czech Political Parties in International Comparison* conference on 14th May 2010 at the Pilsen Centre of the Metropolitan University, Prague.

² Most recently pointed out by Czech political scientist Miroslav Novák (2009: 154) in his analysis of the Czech party system.

years ago toppled their undemocratic regimes and set out on the path of first of establishing, later consolidating and finally maintaining democracy. The question of the role of the political party system in these processes evoked great interest among involved researchers, and became the subject of much debate. One of the frequently posed questions is the assessment of party systems in the sense of their comparison to certain models. These models can be diverse, from somewhat abstract ideals (democracy) to concrete political systems. In Central Europe we most often come into contact with models in the form of west European political and party systems.

The following text is a concise consideration of this specific issue. We are interested in the level to which party systems in Central Europe³ are “standard” or exceptional, and in what sense. In order for us to answer this question, we need to place democracies as such into a broader context. Does Central Europe differ from Western Europe? Is Central European democracy, including its political party system, qualitatively different from Western European democracy?

The consolidation of democracy in Central Europe

It is undoubtable that, with very few and at the same time extremely specific exceptions, democracy cannot function without a political party system. The principle of political pluralism and free choice – the foundation stones of democracy, at least in its minimalist Shumpeter conception – are fundamentally connected to political parties and party systems. It would appear, then, that the establishment and consolidation of democracy is conditional upon the development of political parties. On a general level such a statement has veracity, however upon a closer look at the issue we discover that it contains a whole series of problematic questions. The main question is what do we actually mean by the notion of consolidation of democracy and how does it relate to the political party system.

After the fall of communism, the question of the consolidation of democracy very quickly replaced the problem of democratic transition, from approximately the middle of the 1990s it dominated the relevant field of political science, and to a certain extent became the dominant theoretical starting point for the study of politics in our region; it became “consolidology”. While transition literature focused primarily on political institutions (Wiarda 2002: 493), “consolidological” literature interpreted the issue much more complexly. This is best illustrated by Linz and Stepan’s (1996: 5) comparison of consolidated democracy to “the only play in town”, which implies that a condition of a consolidated democracy is not only institutional but

³ Central Europe is “traditionally” understood to be the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.

also behavioural and value factors.⁴ An accompanying phenomenon to the greater complexity in the understanding of democratic consolidation is then naturally the marked diversity of research approaches, which can be variously classified. We can thus come across the maximalist and minimalist conception (Gruszczak 1995: 13–15; Kopeček 2003: 142–143) or the “narrower” and “broader” conception (Wiatr 1999b: 333–334) of consolidation, and so on.

It appears that as time goes on theories of consolidation become more and more complicated, or their authors become more demanding in relation to the countries of Central Europe. The longer consolidation takes the more that, according to various writers, types and sub-types, processes and sub-processes are discovered within it. The result is then very detailed and complex conceptions, such as for example Schedler’s (1998: 91–92) with its fourteen-item list of conditions for democratic consolidation. German political scientist Klaus von Beyme (2005: 219) presents and comments on Merkel’s four-phase definition of democratic consolidation and up to six indicators of the acceptance of the rules of a parliamentary regime, which relate exclusively to Merkel’s second scale of democratic consolidation – consolidation of political parties and the party system.⁵

When looking at the theoretical legacy of consolidology it is impossible to escape the impression that the theory has overtaken practice. This is because if we were to be genuinely thorough in the application of democratic consolidation in all its theoretical aspects, we would have conclude that it is not only the countries of Eastern Europe that are not democratically consolidated, but also the majority of Western European states, which are for us the embodiment of democracy. The above-quoted Klaus von Beyme (2005: 218) characteristically pointed out that in the case of insistence upon the condition of acceptance of the change of the leading political camp, western West Germany was not democratically consolidated until 1969, the fifth French republic until 1981 and Italy until 1994. It should be noted that this is one condition of many.⁶

⁴ For example J.J. Wiatr (1999a: 8–9) discusses “procedural” and “substantial” criteria of consolidation.

⁵ These are: 1) establishment of reciprocal solidarity among ministers and setting of clear rules of responsibility, 2) acceptance of political responsibility instead of blaming ministers and bringing political conflict to the court-room (constitutional court), 3) limitation of the authority of the head of state in the legislative field (veto), in the constitution of a government, its removal from power and also in the dissolution of parliament, 4) if there is a symmetry in the relationship between the two chambers of parliament, the limitation of the role of the second chamber and the democratisation of the manner in which it is elected, 5) acceptance of the political party as an intermediary between the government and parliamentary majority, 6) acceptance of the reality that parliamentarians are professional politicians, whose remuneration must be sufficiently high in order for them to not be attracted by income outside of parliamentary sources (Beyme 2005:219).

⁶ These two paragraphs are taken from the author’s earlier text (Kubát 2006: 39–40).

The consolidation of democracy and the political party system in Central Europe

There are many more similar examples from this point of view and others, and we can also relate them to the present time. The approach of scholars to the problem of the health of the political party system in Central Europe by way of the conditions for successful consolidation of democracy in our region is a certain equivalent. In the same way that some “Western” political scientists are demanding in terms of the definition of a consolidated democracy, they are also strict in terms of “our” parties and party system. Prominent Polish political scientist Andrzej Antoszewski (2002: 11–13), in his analysis of the Polish party system, presented an illustrative (though not representative) overview of the position of various researcher on this matter. An interesting, and in my opinion characteristic “statistic” emerges from this, being that while “Western” scholars are more likely to emphasise the emergence and mainly the stabilisation of political parties and the party system as a necessary condition of the consolidation of democracy, researchers from Central Europe are more forgiving in this regard, and referring to historical, cultural and other specifics of our region do not insist as much on this condition.

A position emphasising the necessity of stabilisation of the political party system as a condition of the consolidation of democracy exists on two levels: generally theoretical and comparative. On the general level there is, put simply, an assumption that if democracy itself is to function well, it must in accord with its competitive and conflicting nature rest upon an alternation of power, mediated by political parties. If these parties are disrupted, then democracy, or its consolidation, is also disrupted. On the comparative level reference is made to the qualitative difference between the party systems of the “more successful” Western Europe and the “less successful” Central Europe on one side and also between the party systems of the “more successful” Central Europe (including the Baltic states) and the “less successful” Eastern Europe (e.g. Russia and Ukraine) on the other.

In comparison to this, less strict positions build on the assumption that the political and social processes which Western Europe underwent in the second half of the 20th century, and which created the likeness of the local political party system, could not have taken place in our region for historical reasons, and this is why the Central and Eastern European political party system is weaker, which is of course its natural characteristic. At the same time, however, Central European democracies have evidently consolidated (see below). This means that a stabilised political party system is not a necessary condition of this consolidation. Antoszewski (2002: 13) himself closes this discussion by saying that there “after all exists here a certain paradox: we assume that consolidation can be ensured only by such political development that for various reasons we consider absolutely impossible.”

Standard or exceptional democracy in Central Europe

How then to resolve this situation? I think that the most workable path is one of proven empirical comparative analysis. Many politicians, journalists, political commentators and the like in the Czech Republic have called for and still call for the use of Western models. This means that the establishment and maintenance of our (Central European) democracy should be based on the emulation of Western democracies, which are thus understood as politically “better” or more “advanced”. Is there really a qualitative difference between the politics of Central and Western Europe? In what sense?

A conference marking the 15th anniversary of the fall of communism in the countries of Central Europe was held in the Senate of the Parliament of the Czech Republic in 2005. The speakers included perhaps two of the most distinguished Czech political science professors, Petr Fiala (2005) and Miroslav Novák (2005). Both considered the question of the extent to which Czech (and also Central European) society and democracy are standard or exceptional “15 years on”. To simplify, the attribute of “standard” means consolidated in the sense of Western models, while the attribute of “exceptional” relates to post-communism, and whatever we may imagine this notion to mean, in any case we are dealing with a deformation in terms of Western democracies. Both scholars reached the conclusion that the Czech Republic (and the other countries of Central Europe) is democratically consolidated in terms of all key and most frequently quoted aspects of such consolidation, these being institutional, attitudinal and behavioural.⁷ It is democratically consolidated in the sense that its political system struggles with the same or similar problems as the political systems of other European countries. The problems which the Czech Republic is facing are not qualitatively different to the problems of the rest of democratic Europe. The past of course plays its political and other roles here, however this role is not determining: “Czech society is as post-communist as Spanish society is post-Franco and German society is post-Nazi. (...) Post-communism is not the determining and dominant characteristic of Central European society, even though it may be an important characteristic. Central European post-communist countries can, considering their characteristics and on the basis of comparison to other societies, be considered to be ‘standard’ in the European context, whatever this means” (Fiala 2005: 24). Understandably it does not mean that we cannot find various problems. Miroslav Novák (2005: 33) has stated that the Czech Republic “has for many years been a consolidated (though low quality) democracy.”⁸ It is possible to

⁷ No sociologically relevant indicators implicate a difference between Czech society and societies of other member countries of the European Union (Fiala 2005: 23).

⁸ M. Novák builds on Linz and Stepan’s (1996: 137) differentiation of various levels of quality of a consolidated democracy.

consider all Central European countries so; today including Slovakia, which several years ago was considered a “semi-consolidated” democracy (Kopeček 2006: 310; Kubát 2003: 22).

Standard or exceptional party systems in Central Europe

Both authors discuss society and democracy in general. Can their assumptions also be applied to Central European party systems? When considering this issue one is again struck by the above-mentioned difference between how “Western” scholars and those hailing from our region understand the health of the Central European party system. While “Western” scholars are stricter in their evaluation and point out the weak sides to the party system in Central Europe, local scholars are in much more optimistic in this matter and draw attention to the improvement of the state of the party system in the region and its general convergence (with the awareness of all concrete differences) with Western European models (Antoszewski 2009: 295–296).

The above-quoted Polish political scientist Andrzej Antoszewski (2009) is perhaps the only Central European writer who has performed an extensive and empirically supported analysis of the party systems of *all* member countries of the European Union, i.e. studied the party systems of Western European and Central European states together. His work is meaningful both methodologically and by virtue of its content - methodologically because he overcame the “traditional” strict division of the analysis of the political party system into “Western European” and “post-communist”, and with regard to content because the results of his investigation are noteworthy and significant conclusions. What conclusions did he then arrive at?

The Polish scholar analysed the party systems of European countries on the basis of on the whole “regular” verifiable theoretical foundations. He paid attention to three main factors: 1) the status of political parties in the electoral arena (*volatility*, the extent of the support of new and “old” parties, aggregation of support, the level of ineffectual votes and so on), 2) the status of political parties in parliament (the effective number of parties, stability of parliamentary membership and so on) and 3) the status of political parties in the government (longevity of governments, rotation of power and so on). The conclusions of this analysis are, roughly speaking, the following: It is understandable that the party systems of Western and Central Europe have many differences on a general level. This difference is a result of objective, predominantly historical circumstances.⁹ If however we compare them

⁹ A specific position among Western European states is of course occupied by Portugal, Greece and Spain, who similarly to countries in Central Europe had a different post-war development than the remainder of Europe.

on the level of the above-mentioned criteria, we see that they demonstrate many common characteristics. The party systems of both parts of Europe operate in a similar social and political environment (see discussion above of “standardisation” of society and political systems in Central Europe in comparison to Western Europe), which results in the political party systems in both regions facing similar problems and being subject to similar developmental trends. While it is true, for example, that the volatility in our region is higher than in Western Europe, on the other hand it is decreasing here while it is increasing in Western Europe, and this is a long-term trend.

At the same time the two are different if we take into account the internal diversity of party system *within* both regions that is within Western and within Central Europe. In this case, of course we even reach the conclusion that some Central European party systems are “better” than Western European. There, are for example, some Central European countries (Czech Republic) with a lower volatility than Western European countries (Italy and the Netherlands).¹⁰ There are also Central European countries with greater longevity of government (Hungary and Slovakia) than in Western Europe (Finland and Italy). It is true that there are not many of them, but they do exist. It is precisely this variety in which their similarity again expresses itself. This is because in all European party systems we can find indicators that attest to their stability as well as their instability (in the sense of the above criteria). In both Western and Central European party systems we can find stable and unstable governments, success and failure of new and old parties, centralisation and decentralisation of support for various types of political parties, high and low effective number of parties, smooth and problematic alternation of power and so on (cf. Antoszewski 2009: 246–330).

Conclusion

Party systems in Central Europe are different and concurrently the same as those in Western Europe. They are different in terms of political, historical, cultural, social and other specifics. At the same time they are identical in the sense that they face similar problems and challenges. We can also examine the Central European identity of party systems in our region. The answer will, however, be similar. The Central European party system as such both does and does not exist. It exists in the sense that within it are similar development trends relating in the first place to the transition to democracy, later to its consolidation and in the end its “normal” development within a typical, i.e. in the Western European comparison unexceptional, democratic political system. At the same time it does not exist because every party

¹⁰ It should however be pointed out that on average volatility in Western Europe is lower than in our region (Lane – Ersson 2007).

system is unique and reflects the specifics of its country and its politics. All these circumstances of course attest to one fact: party systems in Central Europe are comparatively standard, whatever we imagine this notion to mean.

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