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The Institutionalization of Party Systems – Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia and Slovenia in a Comparative Perspective¹

Petr Jurek

Abstract: *This article focuses on the analysis of the institutionalization of party systems. The objects of the analysis are four party systems of post-communist countries – Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania and Slovenia. To assess the degree of institutionalization, three quantitative criteria are used: electoral volatility, the effective number of parties and the parliamentary age of parties. The main aims of the analysis are to compare aforementioned party systems' degree of institutionalization and simultaneously confirm the assumption that post-communist party systems are in a far more heterogeneous category than is often suggested. At first, the article defines and explains the institutionalization of party systems and uncovers the possibilities of its quantitative assessment. Then, the level of institutionalization of Bulgarian, Croatian, Romanian and Slovenian party systems is evaluated. There are two main conclusions. First, the institutionalization of a party system in the case of Slovenia and Croatia is on a considerably higher level than in the cases of Bulgaria and Romania, although there is some positive progress in the case of Romania in the last five years. Second, common trends, connected with institutionalization and often mentioned as overall, don't have a strong reliance on empirical measures.*

Keywords: *institutionalization, party system, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Slovenia, electoral volatility, effective number of parties, age of parliamentary parties*

Introduction

The party systems of post-communist countries are a common subject of political analysis. The formation of these party systems has brought about an occasion for revisiting theories and concepts developed pursuant to the experiences of Western advanced democracies. Such theories and concepts weren't able to deal with the specific operation of party systems in Central and Eastern Europe, so it was necessary to adapt them to this new reality.

The specifics of post-communist party systems could be largely associated with the overall exceptionality of the transition to democracy in the case of Central and Eastern Europe, which created a specific set of conditions for the development of

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party systems. P. Mair (1998:178) points at the absence of civic society (with the certain exception of Poland). The communistic power monopoly didn't allow the independent compounding of citizens by virtue of their common interest, which could eventually become a base of dissent. After the fall of communistic regimes, new polities to deal with two, in some cases actually three, transitions simultaneously. The transformation of economical systems proceeded at the same time as the transformation of political systems, and, in some cases (e.g. the dissolution of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia), nation building occurred as well. In advanced democracies, such fundamental changes took place in the long term, but post-communist countries had to carry them out during quite a short period of time. Moreover, the party systems of post-communist countries didn't emerge during a long-term process of democratization, instead they begun to develop after the democratization of the political system had been achieved.

By aforesaid differences, a number of deviations in the shape and operation of party systems in post-communist political systems has emerged. Many attempts at describing and explaining these differences have appeared in the past two decades. Examining the level of institutionalization of party systems is one the most frequent. Institutionalization has a crucial impact on the operation of party systems, since it concerns the stability of the mechanism operating within the system and thus influences the predictability of the future direction and function of that system.

The main aim of this study is to analyze the level of institutionalization in four cases of post-communist party systems. Party systems taken under analysis are those of Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia and Slovenia. All analyzed cases fall into the category of post-communist states. Three of them are members of the European Union; Croatia is an applicant for full membership. Croatia and Slovenia have a common past within Yugoslavia, after its disintegration both polities had to pass through the nation-building process. By a mainly quantitative analysis of the institutionalization of party systems, we can argue that post-communist party systems are in a far more heterogeneous category than is often suggested.

The study is subdivided into three sections. First, we analyze the possibilities of measuring the level of institutionalization and thus develop an analytical framework. Then, we use three indicators for rendering the analysis of institutionalization of party systems in Croatia, Slovenia, Bulgaria and Romania. In conclusion, we summarize our observations and discuss some contentious issues.

Party system institutionalization

„Institutionalization refers to a process by which a practice or organization becomes well established and widely known, if not universally accepted. In politics, institutionalization means that political actors have clear and stable expectations

about the behaviour of other actors. [...] An institutionalized party system, then, is one in which actors develop expectations and behaviour based on the premise that the fundamental contours and rules of party competition and behaviour will prevail into the foreseeable future“ (Mainwaring – Torcal 2006: 206). Shortly taken, institutionalization means stability in the patterns of political parties’ behaviour and in the basic framework of party systems.

J. Bielasiak has used two quantitative indicators for the determination of the rate of institutionalization – the index of electoral volatility and the index of effective number of parties. A high range of electoral volatility and fragmentation of a party system signify a fluid political environment and thus signalize a lower rate of party system institutionalization (Bielasiak 2002: 198–206). Besides, Bielasiak sees the stability of electoral rules as an inseparable part of the problem, because the frequent changing of the rules of the game could negatively affect the level of institutionalization (Bielasiak 2002: 191).

S. Mainwaring and M. Torcal (2006: 206–207) identify four main dimensions of party system institutionalization. The first, institutionalized party systems embody stabilized patterns of party competition. This dimension is obviously the most important of all, because stability is the fundamental aspect of institutionalization. It could be measured by an evaluation of electoral volatility.

The second dimension includes the mutual connections of political parties and society. In an institutionalized party system, parties are deeply rooted in society and vice versa. It means that there exist strong linkages between parties and voters. As a result, party competition embodies a high degree of stability and regularity. Shifts of electoral support don’t occur as wholesale as in less institutionalized party systems. This dimension could also be (at least partly) evaluated by the observation of electoral volatility. A low level of electoral volatility signifies tight linkages between parties and society.

The perception of political parties by society is the important component of institutionalization. Political parties should be taken as a fundamental component of democracy. Although voters can express negative attitudes towards the individual parties, they should respect parties and party systems as political institutions.

The fourth dimension of institutionalization by Mainwaring and Torcal affects linkages between parties and their leaders. Parties shouldn’t be existentially dependent on one leader; parties shouldn’t be an instrument for promoting the interests of such a leader. If it is, it can seriously affect the level of party system institutionalization.

P. Webb and S. White point out that institutionalization is usually related to party systems; nevertheless we can’t leave out individual parties. The stability of patterns of party competition is strongly influenced by the autonomy of party organization, development of their organizational structure, their rooting in society and so

on (Webb – White 2007: 4–5). Only party systems insisting on the existence of consolidated political parties can be treated as institutionalized. The persistence of political parties in a party system could be applied as an indicator of parties' stability. Of course, we can't deduce causality between the age of a political party and its internal institutionalization; nevertheless this indicator could be taken as additional.

The institutionalization shouldn't be envisaged as a dichotomous category, where all systems can be categorized as institutionalized or not institutionalized. The experience of post-communist party systems has showed that such an approach is misleading, since there can't be found clear division between both categories.² A better way is to reflect on the institutionalization as a continuum and evaluate institutionalization in terms of its rate (Mainwaring – Torcal 2006: 205). Thus, the level of institutionalization in several cases of party systems can be compared and, as a result of the comparison, party systems can be placed on the axis labelled "fully institutionalized – not institutionalized".

If we try to synthesize the aforementioned possibilities of a quantitative evaluation of the level of institutionalization, we come to the three available indicators: electoral volatility, the effective number of parties and the average age of parties.

Electoral volatility

Electoral volatility is the indicator of the stability of party system. The classical approach to the measurement of electoral volatility was developed by Morgens Pedersen (1983). Electoral volatility describes shifts of electoral support within the party system between two subsequent elections. In calculating, all percentage shifts of electoral support are summarized and then divided by two. In the case of the creation, downfall, merger or division of political parties, fictitious parties with zero electoral gains are added to the calculation.³

Pedersen's index of electoral volatility has been widely used for analyzing the stability of party systems since its creation, without being significantly revised. Notwithstanding, it contains one problem in itself – it measures all kinds of shifts of party preferences no matter their nature. So, the main limitation of Pedersen's classical index is that it is not able to grasp separately the issues of the creation, downfall, merger and division of political parties, which is typical for post-communist politics (Birch 2001: 1). E. N. Powell and J. A. Tucker came up with a modification of the index of volatility, which is able to take into account character of shifts of electoral support. They have divided volatility into two types: type A which reflects the shifts of election

² Good example of disputableness of this approach is attempt of G. Sartori to set off certain party systems as fluid systems or non-systems (Sartori 2005/1976: 217–242). According to Mainwaring and Torcal (2006: 205–206), he didn't eschew some excessive simplifications and inadequacies.

³ For equation see Pedersen 1983.

results caused by the emergence or disappearance of political parties, while the volatility of type B is calculated from the shifts in electoral gains among existing parties. The calculation procedure is based on Pedersen's equation, the only difference is that type A and type B volatility are counted separately⁴ (Powell – Tucker 2009b: 5–7).

For evaluating the electoral volatility of concerned countries, we use the index of volatility modified by Powell and Tucker, because their approach allows us to distinguish the spillover of voters' support between existing parties, which is to a certain extent normal and for the proper alternation of power in democracy also useful, from volatility caused by the emergence and disappearance of new political parties, which indicates the instability party systems. Using this modified calculation of volatility thus enables us to capture maybe the most important difference of post-communist party systems. Results of such a measurement can also highly demonstrate the extent to which parties are rooted in society.

Effective number of parties

When evaluating the number of parties in party systems, we don't make do with merely the sum of relevant parties in the party system. Such an approach does not take account of the variable size of political parties or, rather, size of their electoral support. The most frequently used instrument for assessing the number of parties, which also takes account of their size, is the index of the effective number of parties.

The concept of the effective number of parties was created by M. Laakso and R. Taagepera on the basis of D. Rae's index of fractionalization. The effective number of parties can be calculated either from a share of the votes cast in the election (named the effective number of electoral parties), or the share of mandates received (named the effective number of parliamentary parties). The procedure is similar in both cases: after the calculation and squaring the shares of individual parties, shares are added together and the result is divided by the number 1 (Laakso – Taagepera 1979: 3–27). The question is how to deal with votes included in the "others" category of election results. Given that in the cases examined by us the residual category does not exceed 10 % of the total votes cast, in accordance with the recommendation of M. Gallagher and P. Mitchell we do not include the residual category in our calculations. This will affect the overall result no more than a few tenths of a percent (Gallagher – Mitchell 2005: 600).

The evaluation of the effective number of political parties makes it possible to answer the question how much observed party systems are fragmented. The fragmentation of a party system is an important indicator of a low rate of institutionalization, though causality cannot be inferred among these phenomena. Even

⁴ For equations see Powell and Tucker 2009b: 5–6.

fragmented systems may have a high degree of institutionalization and conversely systems with a low degree of fragmentation may not always be highly institutionalized. It is therefore necessary to assess this criterion in the context of others, and also to take account of its changes over time.

Average age of political parties in parliament

It should make no sense to average the lifespan of all existing political parties. It is better to focus only on – in a certain way – relevant political parties. In this case, we involve in our analysis only political parties represented in parliament. We do not pursue their whole life cycle, but only the duration of their presence in parliament (f. e. Tavits 2005: 289 proceeds similarly). The indicator of the average age of parties in parliament is related to the present, because we analyze only political parties which obtained at least one mandate in parliament according to the last election held. As a starting point we consider elections in 1990, from which the presence of political parties in parliament is beginning to count. Thus the maximal possible score is 20 (years).

There is of course a difference, whether the party which emerges or disappears is a bigger or smaller one. The establishment or termination of the political party acquiring the minimal number of seats and standing “on the edge” of parliament has less impact on the party system than the emergence or disappearance of political parties being able to win elections. Given this constraint, it is necessary to take this criterion as supplementary and auxiliary.

Institutionalization of the party systems of Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania and Slovenia

The party systems of post-communist Europe are often considered as unstable and fluid compared to those in Western Europe. Do the analyzed cases fit into this classic template some 20 years since the transition to democracy? Can we trace a common trend towards greater stability and institutionalization? Now we are going to try answering these questions using three indicators: electoral volatility, the effective number of parties and the average age of parliamentary parties.

Electoral volatility in Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania and Slovenia⁵

One of the features of post-communist party systems is a high level of electoral volatility (f. e. Bielasiak 2002: 198; Mair 1997: 182; Ágh 1998: 202). The analyzed cases confirm this assumption, the average electoral volatility in all cases is well above the average of advanced democracies, which extended to 12,6 % in the 1990s

⁵ If not stated otherwise, this section is based on the calculations of volatility in Powell and Tucker 2009a, Powel and Tucker 2009b and on the author’s own calculations.

(Dalton – McAllister – Wattenberg 2002: 31). The average scores of examined cases are three times higher (see Table 1).

Table 1: Average electoral volatility during period 1990–2007

Country	Type A volatility (%)	Type B volatility (%)	Total volatility (%)
Bulgaria	21	16	37
Croatia	19	11	30
Romania	35	9	44
Slovenia	17	18	35

Source: Powell – Tucker 2009b: 31

If we consider two different types of volatility, i.e. volatility caused by the emergence or disappearance of political parties (type A) and volatility due to shifts in electoral support among existing parties (type B), we come to the conclusion that between the post-communist countries and advanced democracies there exists a significant difference. From the calculation carried out by Powell and Tucker (2009a: 13–14) it is clear that type B volatility prevails over type A in Western democracies. On the contrary, total electoral volatility in post-communist countries is largely made up of type A volatility. Most notably, it is true in the cases of Romania and Croatia; it is also evident in the case of Bulgaria, where in addition after the last elections in 2009, which is not included in the calculation, type A volatility further increased. The only exception is Slovenia, where the proportion of both types of volatility is roughly the same. However, even in the case of Slovenia, type A volatility is significantly higher than the West European average.

Comparing the development of both types of volatility in Western Europe with the post-communist countries, the difference is apparent. Type B volatility has a slightly increasing curve in Western Europe as well as in the post-communist states, whereas the average value in the post-communist countries is about half again as high (8 % to 14 %). Type A volatility creates a significant difference between the two regions. While in Western Europe type A volatility shows a similar trend as the type B volatility, whereas it amounts about one third compared to type B, in post-communist countries it gradually decreases and is now compared with type B volatility by about half again as high. Type A volatility, in this respect, constitutes the main difference between the post-communist party systems and those of Western Europe.

In terms of the average volatility in post-communist countries, the analyzed cases fall into two categories. Bulgaria and Romania show above average values, Croatia and Slovenia embody below average values. In Bulgaria, volatility shows an increasing trend. Type B volatility as well as total volatility has been increasing, but not as much as type A. A Low degree of volatility in the 1990s can probably be

attributed to clearly defined cleavage⁶, the subsequent rise may be linked to the country's economic problems and related voter dissatisfaction with the existing political elite. The case of Bulgaria is in contradiction with the overall slight downward curve of electoral volatility in post-communist countries.

In Croatia, the total volatility is continuously decreasing, while it never reached even the average of post-communist countries. Type A volatility more or less follows the curve of the total volatility; it never reached even the average value in post-communist states, with the exception of volatility between the first and second elections in the early 1990s. Type B volatility faithfully reflects the political situation at the turn of the millennium – an increasing rate of type B volatility indicated the shift in voter preferences from the *till then* dominant party to the opposition⁷ (Dolenec 2008: 28).

In the Romanian case, the overall volatility in most of the time exceeds the average of the post-communist countries. The instability of the party system is confirmed by the continuously high level of type A volatility, of around 35–40 %. In contrast, type B volatility has mostly below average values, suggesting that voters changing their preferences often choose new parties. Developments since 2004, however, indicate a certain tendency towards stabilization.

In Slovenia, the total volatility has been below the average of post-communist countries all the time from 1990 until now. The fact that type A volatility ever since 1990 has not significantly exceeded 20 % clearly demonstrates the relative stability of the party system. In contrast, type B volatility has been generally above the average of type B volatility in post-communist states. It means that the bindings between voters and parties are not so tight in comparison with advanced democracies, nevertheless voters usually chose within the existing number of political parties and do not often vote for the new political parties.

Effective number of political parties in Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania and Slovenia⁸

As a point of reference, we can use the value of effective number of parties calculated for 27 party systems by Arend Lijphart in his seminal work – the average number of electoral parties in the period 1945–1990 was 3,94 and the average number of parliamentary parties in the same period was 3,34 (Lijphart 1995: 99). Compared with these values, the observed cases mostly show a higher effective number of parties, still it is not so significant, with the exception of Slovenia (see Table 2 and 3). Therefore they do not convincingly confirm a general tendency

⁶ communism/anticommunism

⁷ specifically, from the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) to the Social Democratic Party of Croatia

⁸ If not stated otherwise, this section is based on the author's own calculations according to election results available at *PARLINE* and *Elections in Europe*.

which is often mentioned in connection with the post-communist countries, sc. the high degree of fragmentation of their party systems.

Table 2: Effective number of electoral parties

Country	Average since 1990 until last elections	Last elections
Bulgaria	3,99	4,42 (2009)
Croatia	4,65 (since 2000 5,22)	4,23 (2007)
Romania	4,73	3,91 (2008)
Slovenia	6.63	4,93 (2008)

Source: Author's own calculations, based on Gallagher 2010 and election results available at PARLINE and Parties and Elections in Europe.

Table 3: Effective number of legislative parties

Country	Average since 1990 until last elections	Last elections
Bulgaria	3,02	3,34 (2009)
Croatia	2,89 (since 2000 3,54)	3,07 (2007)
Romania	3,64	3,60 (2008)
Slovenia	5,72	4,23 (2008)

Source: Author's own calculations, based on Gallagher 2010 and election results available at PARLINE and Parties and Elections in Europe.

In Western Europe since the Second World War, the continuous growth of the effective number of political parties can be seen, which has significantly accelerated in the last twenty years.⁹ However, changes were gradual¹⁰ and can be recorded only in the long run (Dalton – McAllister – Wattenberg 2002: 32). Now we can compare this trend with the dynamics of the observed cases.

In the case of Bulgaria, the effective number of electoral parties has relatively strong fluctuations, oscillating between 2,82 and 5,80. From the values of the effective number of parties we cannot infer a downward or an upward trend in the parties' number. However, the last two elections have suggested a shift to greater fragmentation of the party system.

The Croatian case is specific, since it has had very low number of effective parties in 1990s, determined by the existence of a dominant party (HDZ). After the landmark elections of 2000, the effective number of parties has grown twice. Then, it was followed by a decrease to the current value of 3,07 (parliamentary parties).

⁹ This increase can be observed in almost all Western European party systems, the only exception is the Netherlands. (Dalton – McAllister – Wattenberg 2002: 32).

¹⁰ with the exception of Belgium and Italy

In the Romanian case, the significant fragmentation of the party system could be observed during the 1990s, the effective number of parliamentary parties was almost 5. In the last two election periods there was a reduction of the effective number of parliamentary parties, which today stands at 3,6.

The Slovenian party system shows a tendency to a progressive concentration of party competition. The effective number of parties has been continually declining,¹¹ from the value of 9,0 in 1990 to the present value of 4,94. Nevertheless, Slovenia is still the most fragmented party system among the analyzed cases.

We can conclude that the analyzed cases do not unambiguously confirm that the post-communist party systems embody a much higher degree of fragmentation of the party system. Due to the contradictory dynamics, i.e. that in the old democracies fragmentation is slightly increasing, while in the post-communist cases it is mostly slowly declining, a further blurring of the differences in the average values of the fragmentation of party systems can be expected in the future.

Average age of current parliamentary parties in Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania and Slovenia¹²

Table 4 shows the average age of parliamentary parties. Only parties obtaining at least one mandate in the last election are included in the calculation. With the exception of Romania, the calculation in principle confirms the trend documented by the other two criteria.

Table 4: Average age of current parliamentary parties in the period 1990–2010

Country	Average age of parties
Bulgaria	10,29
Croatia	13,56
Romania	17,20
Slovenia	16,29

Source: Author's own calculations, based on *PARLINE* and *Parties and Elections in Europe*

Romania embodies a high degree of volatility, especially type A, which would indicate a significantly fluid political environment. A relatively high and frequently changing effective number of parties contribute to this finding. What does a high average age of parliamentary parties mean in this context? It can be seen as a symptom of a certain tendency towards greater consolidation. All political parties

¹¹ The only exception was the elections in 2004, when the value of the effective number of parties stagnated in comparison with prior elections.

¹² If not stated otherwise, this section is based on the author's own calculations according to election results available at *PARLINE* and *Elections in Europe*.

represented at present in the Romanian Chamber of Deputies exhibit significant parliamentary history, the main political parties have been working in parliament since the beginning of the democratic transition. Conclusions about the low level of institutionalization resulting from the previous two criteria can be slightly corrected referring to the high age of parliamentary parties.

In Bulgaria, the average age of parliamentary parties is the lowest among the analyzed cases. It confirms the low level of institutionalization, which results mainly from the high level of electoral volatility. That is also very well illustrated by the fact that today's ruling political party¹³ participated in the election for the first time in 2009. In the terms of party's parliamentary age, this party has existed for only one year. Unlike Romania, in the case of Bulgaria we cannot talk about the formation of a stable core of the party system formed by political parties existing in the long term.

The high average age of parliamentary parties in Slovenia's National Assembly confirms that, despite the high fragmentation of the party system, it embodies a higher degree of stability in comparison with Romania and Bulgaria. The largest political parties have been presented in parliament since 1990 and thus have created the basis of the party system, from which its increasing stabilization may be arise from in the future.

In the case of Croatia, it also recorded a relatively high average age of parliamentary parties, which confirms the previous criteria. Like in the case of Slovenia, we can talk of a "hard core" of the party system, since the two currently strongest political parties have been present in parliament since 1990. Of course it is necessary to take into account the qualitative side of the issue – The Croatian Democratic Movement has undergone a major internal transformation and today it is a party with significantly different characteristics than in the 1990s (Dolenec 2008: 39). Still, its long-term presence may act as a counterweight against the destabilizing forces in the party system.

Conclusion

Direction toward a higher degree of stability reported as a symptomatic sign of party systems in post-communist countries can be, after examining the cases of Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia and Slovenia, confirmed only in the latter two. The lowest rate of institutionalization according to the three observed criteria is exhibited by the Bulgarian party system, which especially embodies the particularly high degree of volatility of both types. A relatively low level of institutionalization is shown also in the case of Romania, mainly due to a very high level of volatility caused by the emergence and disappearance of party system actors. However, there can be observed a positive trend in the direction toward stabilization and consolidation of

¹³ Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB).

the party system in the last two election periods. Slovenia can be evaluated, despite the high degree of fragmentation of the party system, as relatively the most institutionalized party system of the examined cases. It is mainly due to a particularly low level of type A volatility. A considerable high average age of parliamentary parties support aforesaid conclusion and to some extent compensates for the high level of fragmentation of the party system. Croatia is a similar case, but it embodies, in comparison with Slovenia, a higher degree of type A volatility, nevertheless we can monitor the downward trend of this indicator.

The purpose of this text is not to examine the causes and consequences of the observed phenomena, but let us make a brief note on this topic. The traditional explanation of a high level of volatility and fragmentation of the post-communist party systems expects that the basic cause is low voter loyalty, which causes a high degree of electoral volatility, leading to uncertainties in the election results, which eventuates in the emergence and disappearance of political parties, whose parliamentary existence is at risk. However this explanation ignores the role and influence of political elites in the whole process. Margit Tavits offers another explanation, in a sense opposite: the primary reason is an impatient political elite that often cause the emergence of new political parties and the disappearance of parties at risk of electoral defeat – as the result of these changes on the supply side, there is consequently a decline in voter loyalty, which ultimately causes a high degree of electoral volatility (Tavits 2008: 6). This view in effect denies the inevitability of moving towards a higher degree of institutionalization of a party system, with which most scholars examining this issue operate. Likewise, it may undermine the perception of the institutionalization of party systems as a long-term process. In any case, research should pay more attention to the role of elites in the process of institutionalization in the future. Research could thus gain a new dimension, which until now has not been sufficiently taken into account.

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