

# Party Competition in Eastern Europe: Strategies and Equilibrium in Electoral Competition

- Concept paper -

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## *Introduction*

In the last fifteen years many scholarly works have dealt with political aspects of political democratization process in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), approaching issues such as the constitutions and institutional building (Elster et al: 1998), citizen support for political democratization (Rose et al: 1998), elections studies (Rose and Munro: 2003), voter-parties linkages (Kitschelt et al 1999), party organization (Kopecky: 1995, van Biezen: 2003), coalition formation (Grzymala-Busse: 2001), the re-emergence of former communist parties (Ishiyama: 2001, Grzymala-Busse: 2002) or development of social cleavages (Evens and Whitefield: 2000) etc, but only little attention has been paid to strategies that political parties employ in electoral arena in order to win elections and so, how electoral party competition develops in CEE countries. Even the relatively few approaches to party competition in CEE have dealt not with electoral strategies of political parties *per se*, but mainly with social and historical determinants of the types of party competition (see Cotta: 1994, Kitschelt: 1995, Mair: 1997, Kitschelt et al 1999), which makes the issue of party strategies in electoral competition to be virtually a *tabula rasa* area of research. According to my best knowledge, only two scholarly works have approached, although not in a systematic manner, such topic (Mair: 1997, Enyedi: 2005)

The current research project analyzes the strategies that political parties in Eastern Europe employ in electoral competition and the stability of their ideological stances when confronting with voters' preferences. More precisely, the research attempts to respond to the question whether there is an equilibrium outcome in party competition in Eastern Europe, and how political parties from region respond to the existence/non-existence of such equilibrium? Are they moving towards this position, modifying their previous party platforms or even ideological positions, thus risking their reputation for short term benefits, or they are not resilient to such electoral game outcome and stick to initial ideological positions?

## *Where is the puzzle? The theoretical relevance of the research*

When looking to literature on party politics in CEE, there seems to be an obvious internal inconsistency between the theoretical foundations of the research and the methodological approaches. Almost all the literature on party politics on CEE emphasizes that societies

of CEE countries are different than Western societies. It has been argued that there is (or at least there was at the beginning of 1990s) low social differentiation in these new democratic societies and also an acute sentiment of anti-politics, fuelled either by the way how communist politics developed in the region before 1989, or by the dissidents of 1960s and 1970s, especially in Czechoslovakia and Poland. Literature also emphasizes the low level of modernization and industrialization that characterize CEE societies, as a result of cultural or historical factors.

Such particularities of CEE are seen as causes for peculiarities of party systems and political parties. Literature suggests that political parties are weak social and political agents, are disconnected to the society (see for instance the higher electoral volatility in the region than in the Western party systems), that parties are not built on social stratification and, so, they don't tend to represent particular social groups but rather they adopt catch-all messages, and that internal party organization is underdeveloped compared to western political parties. Moreover, parties are usually regarded as creation of ambitious political leaders, which seek political resources not at the level of society but at the level of state's institutions. In conjunction with the small membership and insignificant role for ordinary party activists, CEE's political parties tend to approach an organizational model similar with the controversial Katz and Mair's cartel party.<sup>1</sup>

However, although those peculiarities were acknowledged, there are precisely those topics that have been of interest for political scientists researching the party politics in Eastern Europe. Political parties have continued to be analyzed in regard to their relationships with society, and, since such relationships usually lacked stability, only a limited capacity of prediction and explanation has emerged from this methodological approach. But at the same time, the peculiarities of CEE allow us to follow a different approach, which is much centered on leaders and their personal desires. If leaders play such a prominent role in the region as the literature acknowledges, then they should be the principal target of political research in the field of party politics and their quest for political power should provide important elements for predicting party behavior in electoral arena.

There is enough theoretical justification to focus the research on party strategies in electoral arena to the desires of political leaders.<sup>2</sup> Contrary to western political parties, parties have no long-standing ideologies which should constrain the behavior of the leaders, and so, parties are much more ideologically diffuse in CEE.<sup>3</sup> Leaders are not effectively constrained by the activists or militants, and so they can easily impose their will and personal objectives to the organization. They also provide parties with the political resources that are essential for organizational continuity, such as media access, resources from public offices and so forth.

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<sup>1</sup> Although it should be acknowledged several important differences such as inexistence of a 'fixed menu' from which voters choose (Katz and Mair: 1995), as well as the debate around the usefulness of this concept.

<sup>2</sup> Or on 'private desires' how Laver (1997) called them.

<sup>3</sup> In the last year in Romania, three parliamentary parties have attempted or changed their ideological marks.

In addition, this research brings out another issue which has important theoretical relevance and which, surprisingly, has been neglected in the literature of party politics, although it has been largely discussed in political theory, especially in the democratic theory. What type of democratic theory suits best our analytical approach when we look to CEE countries? The first type of approach (what I call sociological approach) finds its theoretical justification on a particular view of the democratic process. For this approach, parties (even in CEE countries, despite their peculiarities) are agents of the society, and thus, because they act merely as representatives, there should be some links between parties and society in which they function. Thus, for the sociological approach representative democracy is a suitable theoretical instrument for analytical purposes when we deal with CEE societies. My substantial (implicit) argument is that it is not. My research will argue in the background that the foundation for analyzing party politics should be a competitive model of political democracy that is based on the Schumpeterian/Dahl tradition. Otherwise, we do nothing else than using an appropriate theoretical tool for research on party politics in CEE.

#### *A rational choice approach to CEE party competition*

In spite of the impressive literature that uses the sociological approach, it hardly could be said that we have a better understanding of the way political parties compete for the votes of the citizens in elections. We do have a rather impressive amount of factual data about parties and voters and some noticeable scholarly attempts to link parties with the social groups, but I would argue that we still do not have an understanding of how political parties compete in electoral arena.<sup>4</sup> In this context, I argue that rational choice models (RCM) of party competition would be better fitting the particularities of CEE countries. The rational choice approach are better suited to explain the behavior of political parties in electoral arena because it treats the behavior not as responding to social stimulus (political culture, trust, civic participation, intra-party politics), but as intentional behavior. There is no a priori theoretical reason to consider the social structure more important than intentions of the leaders in East European politics.<sup>5</sup> By contrary, much of the arguments in the theory we have about societies of Eastern Europe contradict this assumption.

The theory I make use of in my research comes from the Hotelling/Downsian tradition of spatial competition between political parties. As all countries from CEE have multiparty systems, I partly disregard two-party competition models (although they provide useful information about equilibrium outcomes), and I shall make use of the RCMs with multiple political parties.

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<sup>4</sup> I give the term “understanding” the same meaning once has been used by William Riker (1990). He basically argued that we can ‘understand’ a political phenomenon only by subsuming it to a covering law which, in turn, is covered by a scientific theory.

<sup>5</sup> Sociological approaches to East European party politics usually rely on the seminal work of Lipset and Rokkan (1962). However, their theory attempted to explain particular phenomena of Western societies, that is the development of party systems, voters’ entrenchment, the development of social and political cleavages, and the freeze of party systems as a result of such cleavages. This raises one question that was quite common in early 1990s about the usefulness of theories developed in western societies to analyze political phenomena in Eastern Europe. Although I don’t question the possibility of applying such theories for Eastern societies, I think there are not sufficient social prerequisites (at least in Lipset and Rokkan’s terms) to have a meaningful analysis of this kind.

The theory usually predicts that, in a two-party competition on a single dimension, with parties interested to win the elections, the equilibrium outcome<sup>6</sup> is the position of median voter (MVP) (Hotelling: 1928, Downs: 1957, Black: 1958). Analyzing the multiparty competition, Downs (1957) originally predicted that in such situation, the MVP is not anymore the equilibrium outcome of the game. However, later formal research has shown that this assumption of Downs<sup>7</sup> does not hold and, under several conditions about uncertainty, party objectives, and voter distribution, MVP is a maximization strategy for parties (Davis and Hinich: 1968, Hinich and Ordeshook: 1969, 1970, McKelvey: 1983, Calvert: 1985, Adams: 1999).

These findings have important implications for the study of politics. I would argue that the results of the formal models are also extremely useful for the understanding of party competition in Eastern Europe. First of all, they give a formal, logical explanation for why parties put forward similar political platforms. Secondly, they give us an instrument with which we can meaningfully analyze the party competition in multidimensional competition (as the political systems of Eastern Europe are supposed to be). Centripetal competition is a sign of maximization behavior and it is important to see whether parties from Eastern Europe follow the maximization strategy or not. By assumptions we made and taking into consideration the environment in which they compete, I expect a high degree of convergence in empirical situations.

#### *Data and empirical analysis*

I mainly look to the behavior of parties from Romania in the electoral competition as an empirical base for my research. I have the intention of expanding the empirical analysis to Hungary and Poland, but this is dependent on the availability of suitable empirical data. In this perfect scenario, we would cover three party systems that differ significantly in terms of stability of parties.

The research needs data about the placement of parties and voters on important dimension for party competition. These dimensions are not difficult to estimate and moreover, they are reported in many case studies, but I think that economic left-right and cosmopolitan-national cover the main issues on which parties compete in CEE. There are many individual level surveys that show the distribution of voters on these dimensions (one is Comparative Studies of Electoral Systems-CSES, which is a post-election survey). The data about placements of political parties is also available from different sources: voters' perception about the placements of parties (as in CSES), content-analysis of electoral manifestos, or country surveys.

As the intention of the research is to capture the ideological adaptation of parties in order to maximize the electoral gains, I need time-series data (not necessarily, although ideally, collected with the same method).

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<sup>6</sup> The term of equilibrium comes from microeconomics and designates that particular situation from which none of the players (or firms, or parties, or individuals etc) can 'deviate' by moving alone and still be better off.

<sup>7</sup> I use the word 'assumption' not in a pejorative sense, but it indicates that Downs did not offer any formal proof for his statement on the outcome of multiparty competition.

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