

**The Programmatic Turnaround of Communist Successor Parties in East Central
Europe, 1989-1998**

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ABSTRACT:

The communist parties' adaptation to democracy is one of the more remarkable developments of post-1989 politics in East Central Europe. Ironically, unresponsive and incompetent ruling communist parties have in some cases spawned successors that have been able to respond democratic electoral cleavages and convince large portions of the electorate of their ability to govern democratically and competently. This paper argues that the main factor underlying this ability has been organizational transformation of the communist parties: specifically, the extent to which these parties centralized and streamlined their organizations, while breaking with a discrediting past. This transformation is itself a function of elite skills developed under communism.

KEY WORDS: political parties; communist successors; electoral cleavages; policy programs; Slovakia, Czech Republic, Poland

“The Programmatic Turnaround of Communist Successor Parties in East Central Europe, 1989-1998”

The remarkable turnarounds by the successors to the ruling communist parties in East Central Europe are among the most surprising developments in post-communist politics. The radical collapse of their regime in 1989, and their nearly complete discreditation, meant that these parties had little democratic credibility and few popular appeals, and instead faced profound suspicions regarding their motives and intentions. Several observers concluded that to survive in the new democratic systems, these parties would either rely on nostalgia for the socialist era and its safety nets, or become outright populists and authoritarians (Kimball 1993, Jasiewicz, 1993, Kitschelt 1992.) Yet within a few years, several of these parties returned to power, winning elections with appeals of managerial competence and administrative effectiveness in implementing economic and political reform.

This article examines what it took for the communist successor parties to convince the electorates of their transformation and new democratic intentions—and even more importantly, their suitability and effectiveness as democratic governors. In contrast to existing explanations, which emphasize the structures of political competition or party linkages, this article argues that change had to come from within: specifically, communist successor parties had to make significant organizational changes to make their programmatic transformation feasible, credible, and sustainable.

The communist successors' trajectories diverged rapidly after 1989. The orthodox Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (Komunistická Strana Čech a Moravy) in the Czech Republic became largely a protest party, maintaining relatively orthodox communist

stances that retained the loyal support of a narrow constituency, but did not resonate with a broad electorate. Its efforts to transcend existing economic cleavages by promoting “autonomy” failed to convince potential voters, and the party relied on increasing dissatisfaction with the status quo, rather than on its policy proposals, to gain greater popular support. The Slovak Party of the Democratic Left (Strana Demokratickej Ľavici) committed itself to democracy and the free market, even if inconsistently and without broad popular support (its highest vote share was 14.7%, in 1992). The party pursued a shifting constituency, and its programmatic inconsistency left it open to charges of opportunism and “fishtailing.” As a result, while few doubted its democratic commitments, it had far less credibility as a strong and stable potential governing party.

In contrast, the Hungarian Socialist Party (Magyar Szocialista Párt) and the Social Democracy of Poland (Socjaldemokracja Rzeczpospolitej Polskiej) have not only dramatically turned around their appeals, but have done so with remarkable success—both have successfully pursued broad electorates with their appeals for a continuation of reform, but with greater sensitivity and competence. The Hungarian successor gained a broad support base after 1993, winning the 1994 elections with 33% of the vote. Its Polish counterpart consistently moderated its ideology and just as steadily became the most popular party in Poland, more than doubling its support from 1991 to 1997, with public support levels in 2001 topping 50%.¹

In short, these programmatic transformations vary in both kind and degree. The Czech party changed its programs the least, and retained much of its former appeals. The Slovak party transformed its programs, but did not offer a credible alternative to the voters. Finally,

¹ CBOS polls, cited in *Donosy* electronic news service.

the Polish and Hungarian parties not only dramatically and credibly transformed their programs, but created new dimensions of competition. To account for this variation, I examine the explanations for the parties' ability to transform their programs and convince the electorate, and present an alternative explanation that focuses on the internal organizational bases for programmatic transformation.

Theoretical Context

Programmatic transformation was so important because program appeals were these parties' only real means to sway the electorate. Other communist successor parties could retain their patronage networks by not ceding power in 1989 (as the Bulgarian or Romanian parties did), and others could rely on populist leaders (as in the case of the Slovak HZDS.) The Czech, Slovak, Polish, and Hungarian communist successor parties, however, lost access to structures of clientelistic mobilization when they were forced to exit from power, and their popular discreditation hampered charismatic mobilization.

Nor were the parties' past programs much to go on. Under communism, these programs were little more than a ritualistic listing of goals and ideology. They were not responsive to popular concerns or priorities, provided no real policy alternatives, and did not swerve from the party's ideological line. Thus, if they were to demonstrate that they were a reliable alternative to the political parties emerging from the anti-communist opposition, the successors' programs after 1989 had to address these shortcomings.

In short, the programs had to become *responsive*: focused on the voters (rather than on internal party concerns), policy oriented, and flexible. Proposals that focused on priorities of the electorate and the voters' concerns, instead on a few narrow appeals, were more likely to gain the party significant electoral support. First, economic growth and stability was the top

priority of the voters (Kitschelt et al, 1999). Over three-quarter of all electorates under consideration saw the economy as the crucial issue (Kitschelt, 1995.) The second dimension in East Central European politics ran between secular, cosmopolitan, and liberal attitudes towards the separation of Church and state, national identity, and civil rights on the one hand, and more religious, particularist, and authoritarian attitudes on the other. These, then, were the two main dimensions of party competition to which political parties now had to respond. Subsequently, they had to formulate programs and appeals that responded on multiple occasions to shifts in popular opinion and to the distinct opportunities presented by the countries' political environments.

Beyond addressing existing voter priorities, political parties could also create *new dimensions of competition*. Where the communist parties were discredited and forced to exit from power, political parties tended to converge in their rejection of the old system, and in broad calls for reform. Under such conditions of general policy consensus, communist successor politicians tried to highlight other dimensions of competition. Instead of directly competing on existing dimensions (at the risk of being outflanked by other, more credible parties), communist successors could attempt to compete across these cleavages. Such efforts to create new, orthogonal, axes of competition, dubbed "heresthetics" by William Riker (1986), privilege their creators ex ante. In effect, a party can set up the very standards on which other parties compete-the same standards which it can best fulfill.

Circumventing existing policy cleavages with new ones that offered a comparative advantage to the communist successors was also a programmatic strategy that was most likely to be electorally successful. If the successor parties continued with their old communist appeals, they were likely to retain a core group of orthodox supporters, but were unlikely to

convince the broader electorate. If they only moderated their policy appeals, the successors still had to compete with other centrist parties after 1989, whose origins in the anti-communist opposition often made them more credible. Finally, too rapid or radical a programmatic turnaround might be perceived as an opportunistic “whitewashing,” rather than an indication of real commitments. Creating credible new appeals that transcended existing cleavages, on the other hand, got around the problem of taking unpopular or non-credible stances on existing issues.

If the creation of responsive and heresthetic appeals requires considerable strategic flexibility, what accounts for the parties’ relative agility? First, the structure of party competition itself can limit or promote strategic flexibility. Specifically, fragmented party competition, characterized by numerous parties that competed on orthogonal dimensions, the volatility of the new democratic politics tended to promote vague appeals, and the crowding of parties, could lead to centrifugal competition (Sartori, 1976; Kirchheimer, 1972; Cox, 1987). This sort of competition makes moderating party programs and correctly identifying constituencies difficult, and it destabilizes the existing cleavages, making heresthetical innovations less likely to succeed. Thus, if this explanation is correct, the more fragmented the political system, the more difficulty parties have in transforming their programs. However, the Polish party system began with the highest initial fragmentation, and then consolidated rapidly after 1993. Yet the SdRP transformed its stances immediately, and its capacity to respond has not altered much. Similarly, the Slovak party did not respond to the drop in party fragmentation in 1992-4 by increasing its responsiveness during this time.

Second, the opportunity structures presented by the transition to democracy itself also exerted an influence on programmatic transformation. As Perkins (1996) has argued, parties

with ready access to bureaucratic structures are likely to develop patronage structures, and thus do not have to rely on programmatic statements. In contrast, parties with strong support organizations are likely to develop mass organizations, with firm ideological statements and loyalty to the existing voter base. Such parties would have difficulty transforming their programs, given these existing commitments. However, all the successor parties considered here were forced to exit from power and were unable to rely on patronage. All had extensive organizations, yet only one (the Czech) chose to rely on it.

Even if they do not account for all the variation, these two hypotheses fruitfully point the way to another potential explanation. The competitive environment clearly exerted considerable pressures on the parties, and the party organizational forms influenced the sort of response that was possible. To examine how party programs responded to these incentives, and why, however, it is necessary to turn to the internal party structures and leaders, who mediate between environmental influence and party strategy.

This alternative examination of programmatic transformation will rely on three sources of data: public opinion polls conducted in 1992-1996 in the region,² content analysis of the parties' programs from 1990 to 1998, and interviews with party elites. The content analysis of the party programs here focuses both on the salience of issues to the party, and on the relative stances taken by the parties in two critical issue domains: economic reform and secularism. (The full database of party programs, the coding criteria, and the original documents is available upon request from the author.)

The Organizational Bases for Programmatic Transformations

² Data from Tóka, Gábor, "Party Systems and Electoral Alignments in East Central Europe." Machine readable data, Central European University, 1992- 1996.

For programmatic transformation to occur, the party had both to make new commitments, and to minimize internal resistance to this transformation. Thus, both a break with the past (renouncing past appeals, and committing the party to the new system) and centralization (elite control over decisionmaking, the elimination of party democracy and auxiliary organizations, and reducing both the number and significance of party members) were prerequisites. Otherwise, party democracy could hinder programmatic transformation. Members' opinions would have to be canvassed, and their support secured, taking up both time and resources. As various factions lobby for the inclusion of their views, internal divisions and conflicts further confuse the process of writing and disseminating party appeals (Rose, 1980: 147; Harmel and Janda 1994: 265; Stroll, 1990). Finally, where the party's members and core supporters are both powerful and differ from the electorate in their views, they could prevent the party from tapping into the concerns of the broader electorate.

To centralize and break with the past, the communist successors had to have the skilled new leadership to rapidly transform the organizations after the collapse of the communist regime. These leaders now also had to anticipate electoral priorities and reactions, and respond accordingly. Relatively experienced, pragmatic, and innovative elites were especially important if the party would attempt to create new dimensions of competition, since heresthetics placed an emphasis on both innovation and credibility. Where the parties broke with the past and centralized, they had the organizational wherewithal to become programmatically responsive. Where they had skilled elites, they not only stood a better chance of responding to the voters, but could more readily create new dimensions of competition.

The importance of centralization and the elites who led it is illustrated by the trajectories of the communist successors. The Czech KSČM was led after 1989 by elites who had little experience with reform, or societal negotiation, given the post-1968 stagnation of the Czechoslovak communist party. Instead of breaking with the past or centralizing, the party retained many of its old structures and appeals, and resisted centralization, holding on to a greater percentage of its members and organizations than any other party considered here.³ Above all, party programs were to be created “exclusively on the basis of a pluralism of opinions” within the party.⁴ The KSČM’s preoccupation with its members meant that its leaders then tailored the party program to appeal to the narrower circles of orthodox party supporters, rather than the broad electorate.⁵

In contrast, the Slovak SDEL both broke with the past and centralized. It firmly rejected communist ideology, and insisted that any communists should join instead its orthodox splinters.⁶ The party centralized decision-making within the party (more than any other party considered here), emasculated the party membership, and focused above all on gaining votes.⁷ Unlike its Czech counterpart, the new Slovak party leadership centralized program formulation, by putting the party's 20-member Executive Committee in charge. However, it

³ Zpráva ÚV KSČM o činnosti strany od 1. Sjezdu KSČM 1993: 26- 7. “Pisemná Zpráva UV KSČS pro 18 Sjezd KSČS,” (Written Report of the Central Committee for the 18th Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia) Doumenty 18 Sjezdu KSČS, Praha, 3-4.11.1990 Praha: ÚV KSČS, 1990.

⁴ KSČM, *Teze Zprávy* ...1992-3

⁵ Jiří Svoboda, 5th meeting of the Central Committee of the KSČM, *Hálo Noviny* 28 May 1991

⁶ *Naše Pravda*, 1 July 1991.

⁷ Author’s interview with Milan Ftačnik, Bratislava, 31 January 1997.

too had few skilled or experienced elites, given the earlier stagnation of the Czechoslovak Communist Party.

In Poland (and in Hungary), skilled new elites both broke with the past and centralized the parties. These new elites had extensive experience in earlier policy reform, negotiation, and responding to popular concerns, in their relatively more liberal communist regimes. As a result, Polish SdRP leaders insisted on the primacy of voters over party members, and the need for centralized organization.⁸ Party statutes forced potential members to agree with the new leadership, its programmatic reforms, and the new character of the party.⁹ The national committee wrote all programs, and had the final say on all candidate lists, coalitions, and regional leadership choices, with no consultation of the members.¹⁰

Responsiveness

These organizational changes translated into programmatic transformation. First, in centralized parties, programs could turn to policy questions. The ratio of emphases on internal to public issues is the first indicator of whether it intends to address widely held popular concerns, or a narrow group of party activists and supporters.¹¹ As Table 1 shows, the more the party had centralized, the lower the percentage of its programs spent on internal party questions and identity. Where the party leadership depended on the rank and file, and the membership was not contingent on acceptance of the program, the party paid less

⁸ Interview with Zbigniew Siemiątkowski, *Dziennik Lubelski*, 28 February 1990.

⁹ Interview with Andrzej Urbańczyk, *Gazeta Krakowska* 29 January 1990.

¹⁰ *Gazeta Wyborcza* 1 July 1997, *Polityka* 15 February 1997, *Wprost* 16 February 1997.

¹¹ Arguably, an inward-looking program does not preclude programmatic responsiveness. For example, a party could devote 20% of its program to its own concerns, and use the rest to precisely respond to the voters. Or, a party could spend a tiny fraction of its programs on itself, and yet fail to respond to public concerns.

attention to its public policy, and focused instead on the symbolic dimensions that concerned the members, such as the party name, symbols, and its history.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE.

Second, organizational change further determined programmatic responsiveness by creating the trade-off between appealing to party supporters and the rest of the electorate. If the two groups differ considerably, reaching out to a broader electorate may mean losing the party's core supporters, limiting the parties' flexibility and ability to focus on the voters. The parties' membership policies institutionalized this trade-off. The more the party relied on members for political mobilization and support, the more it had to address their concerns, and give them incentives for continued support. Where the parties first retained or allowed conservative communist members, and then tailored party programs to suit their demands (as in the Czech KSČM), the gap between party supporters and rest of the voters grew, as did the alienation of the broader electorate. In contrast, where the parties had first formulated responsive programs, and then made membership contingent on their acceptance, the trade-off was minimized, as in the Polish SdRP. Members had to agree to the parties' new moderate course to join the party. Assured of member support for the program, such parties could appeal to the broader electorate with less worry about losing existing support.¹²

As we can see from Table 2, the more centralized parties had smaller gaps between the priorities of their electorate and their immediate supporters. Nonetheless, how well parties could take advantage of this lower tradeoff depended on their elite skills. Thus, the gap between the priorities of the Slovak party supporters and the electorate is broader than in

¹² *Życie Warszawy* 9 August 1993.

Poland or in Hungary largely as a result of the SDL elites' inability to correctly anticipate the broader electorate

TABLE 2 HERE

Third, the parties' stances themselves also reflect their organizational centralization, both in the degree of flexibility (as measured by the variance around the mean), and their position on the competitive dimension (as measured by the mean itself.) Earlier organizational centralization and break with past practices and members increased flexibility for these parties. The centralized Slovak and Polish communist successors could more readily change their economic stances than their Czech counterpart. The Polish SdRP thus evolved its views to a strong support of economic reform, as a result of its centralized, flexible program-writing mechanisms. As Table 3 shows, the SdRP's economic stances show the greatest variance around the mean, indicating the flexibility with which it changed its views

TABLE 3 HERE

Similarly, centralization meant the Slovak party could easily change its stances on secularism, as evidenced by Table 4. The centralized Polish party did not change its secularist stances as much, part of its efforts to differentiate itself from the other parties, and to create a new dimension of competition.

TABLE 4 HERE

The individual cases illustrate how centralization affected programmatic changes. Thus, despite the goal of broad support,¹³ the KSČM did little to appeal to broad electorates. Instead, the party focused on cementing the loyalty of its members, the most loyal and extreme communists from the pre-1989 era. For one thing, the party's leaders were caught

¹³ Minutes of the Nymburk Meeting, *Naše Pravda* 13 February 1994.

between the need to appear consistent to the party members, and the desire to respond to the broad electorate: the goals of the two groups diverged as the party insisted on retaining its members.¹⁴

The party's reliance on its members reinforced the narrowness of the party's appeals, since the differences between the Czech party supporters and non-supporters were greater than in any other country studied by 1993. Throughout 1990-1996, the policies of the government led by the ODS, and the ability of the Prime Minister (Václav Klaus) to explain the new market reforms and gain popular backing for them created a considerable pro-market and pro-reform consensus among the majority of the Czech electorate (Appel, 2000). A considerable portion, or 42%, of the electorate also supported decommunization (the removal of communist officials from their posts), and lustration (the banning of high ranking communist officials from holding public office for several years.)

In contrast, the KSČM's supporters were far more reluctant to support the free market reforms, to abandon the welfare state, or to decommunize, by margins of 22 to 31%. Party supporters overall also tended to be older, more pessimistic, and less supportive of democracy, than the rest of the electorate. Thus, appealing to one group was likely to reduce the support of the other. Party leaders recognized this dilemma, but felt bound by their commitment to the members.¹⁵ The party's would-be constituency, then, continued to be a rather narrow group of existing party supporters, who differed radically from the rest of the electorate.¹⁶

¹⁴ Author's interview with Miloslav Ransdorf, 26 September 1996, Prague.

¹⁵ *Hálo Noviny* 25 May 1991, 5th Meeting of the Central Committee of the KSČM.

¹⁶ Klub levicových sociologů a psychologů. "Zaverečná Zpráva ze sociologického výzkumu...No 6, 1993.

Policy issues were secondary to internal party questions for the KSČM. Czech party programs were far more concerned with its internal party life, and devoted the least space initially to public issues. As a result, anywhere from 10 to 24% of its programs until 1993 referred to the party members and to the party's self-identification. After 1993, and the relative centralization of the party under a new leadership, these references dropped, but the party was unable to focus credibly on policy: by that point, it had already developed a highly unfavorable reputation among most of the Czech electorate.

Nor could the party retain its initially moderate economic stances. With the ascendance of orthodox members and activists in the party by 1991, new pressures arose on the leaders to comply.¹⁷ Thus, beginning with 1992, the party's programs reacted against market reforms, calling for protectionist, interventionist, and redistributive measures. The party's next programs shifted stances even more, towards orthodox communist appeals, especially in the party's views on the welfare state/ social policy, which went from a 2 to 3.4 (on a 1-4 scale, with 4 being extreme support for a socialist welfare state.) Subsequently, the party's programs were consistently opposed to further free market reforms, and continued its relatively mild secular stance. The party was unable to respond to the voters, even when the economic situation took a severe downturn in 1996-7, and the consensus on reform began to crumble.

In contrast, the Slovak SDE's centralization, and its insistence on new members pledging allegiance to the program minimized the tradeoff between appealing to voters and to party members. Whether or not the party could take advantage of this minimal tradeoff, however,

¹⁷ Vladimír Papež, *Naše Pravda*, 31 July 1992.

was another matter. Despite its focus on the electorate, the SDL did not pursue anyone group consistently.

Its centralization allowed the SDL to emphasize public policy over any concerns with its internal life—emphases on the latter dropped from 18% in the first program to zero mentions in 1993 and in 1994. In 1995, its programs tentatively began to mention the party itself again, and devoted 5-10% of its program to self-identification that reassured the public of the party's ability to reform the constitution and to ensure democratic rule of law.

The party's centralization meant extreme flexibility, as it shifted back and forth in its economic views. In 1990, the party was moderate in its support for the free market. By 1993, its leaders proudly considered the party more liberal than the ruling HZDS.¹⁸ Content analysis shows that in its specific stances, the Slovak party was overall the most supportive of free market competition, and the most willing to lower welfare state provisions of the four parties under consideration. (See Table 3). In 1995, however, the programs returned to greater criticism of the market, and of private property. Similarly, its stances on secularism switched back and forth between appeals to Catholic values, and traditional Left secularism (See Table 4.) This inconstancy led to accusations of *lavirovanie*, perhaps best translated as “fishtailing,” or “slaloming,” by both domestic and international critics.¹⁹ Without prior experience in policy reform or societal negotiation, the party's elites were unable to correctly “read” the electorate, making appeals to one group (eg, the workers in 1992), only to ignore it thereafter.

¹⁸ Peter Weiss, quoted in *Pravda*, 8 June 1993.

¹⁹ *Narodná Obroda* 23 May 1993. Vladimír Drozda, *Pravda* 18 October 1995.

In the Polish case, the initial tradeoff between appealing to party members and to the electorate was gradually minimized. Party supporters remained steadfastly secular, and far more so than the rest of the electorate. Not surprisingly, party supporters were also more likely to oppose de-communization. However, the party's economic stances were far less controversial, and its claims of expertise were broadly welcomed. As a result, the SdRP continued to broaden its electorate, denying class-based appeals in 1993, and increasingly appealed to all Poles.²⁰

SdRP programs were not concerned with its members. Even the first documents, from the January 1990 founding congress, consisted of only 12% references to its internal life. A single programmatic document from 1990 addressed to the members and supporters of the party, but subsequent programs contained no references to its members, the party organization, or internal splits.

The party prioritized economic issues, which took up from over a third to nearly a half of its programs. Initially, the SdRP's programs were far more skeptical of the free market than its Czech or Slovak counterparts. Unlike the former Czechoslovakia, where the free market reforms did not begin until January 1991, Poland had implemented its market reform program, the Balcerowicz plan, a full year earlier, in January 1990. The reforms were painful,²¹ and the SdRP initially seemed willing to exploit this pain. As early as March 1990, however, the party increasingly supported economic reform,²² and continued to do so.

²⁰ The emphasis on this broad electorate rose until it took up nearly 10% of the program by 1997.

²¹ The reforms made the currency convertible, lowered trade barriers, and lowered state subsidies. As a result, unemployment shot up from 7,000 in 1989 to 2 million in 1990, real wages dropped by 20% in 1990 (and did not recover until 1991), and inflation increased from 25% in 1989 to 586% in 1990.

²² *Trybuna Ludu* 5 March 1990.

Content analysis of the programs shows that its support for the welfare state dropped from 3.62 to 2.4 after 1991 (on a 1-4 scale). Similarly, the programs now adopted a decidedly more pro-market reform stance (from an average of 2.85 to 1.97). The party's 1993 program called for different forms of privatization, and for strategic intervention of the government in supporting certain enterprises and not allowing others to go bankrupt.

Party elites justified these transformations by the necessity for further reform, and the SdRP's superior ability to administer these reforms. Moreover, unlike the Slovak party, the SdRP elites gradually changed the party's appeals, and in one direction only, making the party seem flexible and pragmatic, rather than inconsistent. The party's victory in the 1993 elections led to an even more pro-economic reform stance, and a call for "supporting economic reform by all parties."²³ The party's 1997 program, developed over the course of 1996, marked an even bigger turn towards the free market, backing entry into the EU and other Western international structures. This program shifted considerably in favor of the free market, and nixed expectations of government intervention, the welfare state, and redistributive efforts. Thus, the party's centralization gave it considerable programmatic flexibility, while its elite skills made the transformation credible and accepted.

The party insisted on a secular identity as part of its commitment to the new democratic system. As early as the 1991 elections, its secularism was one of its most noted characteristics (Jasiewicz, 1993.) The SdRP took up a call for the declericalization of public life, the full separation of church and state, a completely secular education, and the removal of any privileges accrued to the Church, and abortion rights.

²³ *Zycie Warszawy*, 21 October 1994.

Ironically, in a country stereotyped as deeply Catholic, these stances resonated with a majority of the electorate, thanks to the often clumsy interventions of the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy in 1990-1992,²⁴ which were seen as “interference” in normal politics.²⁵ As a result, the SdRP's indirect claims that it would curb the power of the Church were appealing. They were also convincing, given the fact that the SdRP's predecessor had battled with the Church prior to 1989, and the SdRP had consistently remained opposed to a political role for the Church after 1989 (Gebethner, 1995).

Thus, organizational centralization both minimized the voter-member trade-off, and maximized responsiveness to the broad electorate. While many existing analyses have often assumed that the trade-off between appealing to party activists and to voters is constant and exogenous (Aldrich, 1983; Robertson, 1976; Tsebelis, 1990; May, 1973), in the post-communist context shows it can be of the parties' own making. It is also self-reinforcing—for example, a party with active and orthodox members would alienate the broader electorate with appeals to the members. As the party grew more dependent on its membership, it was increasingly bound to orthodox stances. The high costs of building internal consensus on party programs in programmatic parties meant that the less streamlined the party, the higher this tradeoff. As a result, parties that did not centralize focused on their members instead of policy, could not respond readily to the broader electorate, and could not readily modify their stances.

²⁴ After 1989, the clergy insisted on “instructing” the voters during church services, and pressured post-Solidarity parties to heed Church teachings, in which they included religious education in schools and a ban on abortion.

²⁵ The Church's approval ratings went from 88% in 1989 to around 30% within 2 years. CBOS, “Społeczna Ocena Działalności Instytucji Politycznych,” Komunikat z Badań, Warsaw, October 1990.

Heresthetics

If the parties could capitalize on a comparative advantage, they could create a new dimension of competition that did not conflict with a commitment to reform. Doing so, however, required skilled elites who could make such claims credibly, and the organizational centralization to give these elites the dominant voice in the party. One issue that fulfilled these requirements was managerial competence. It did not conflict with the reform program, did not commit the party to a particular policy stance, and could be made credible both by the successor parties' previous administrative experience, and the relative incompetence of the first democratic governments.

A vast majority of the voters in the countries under consideration agreed that the provision of competent managers by political parties was extremely important for the country. However, whether or not the communist successor parties could respond to this voter priority depended on the elite skills produced by the communist parties' earlier reform and response efforts. The more the parties had earlier reformed and implemented liberalizing economic and political policies, the more their new elites could claim administrative experience and managerial expertise, portable to the democratic setting.

Thus, given its earlier stagnation, and subsequent continuity, public opinion polls showed that the Czech KSČM was also seen as the most incompetent party in the political arena, and the one least likely to achieve any of a host of government roles.²⁶ Aside from a party leader's admonition in 1992 that "we too, have experts," the party did little to answer the call for administrative expertise. The Czech KSČM's other effort to create new grounds for competition failed. During 1991-2, among the party members and activists, the current

²⁶ Tóka data.

supporting “autonomy” (*samosprava*) grew to dominate the party, and so party programs reflected this preference.²⁷ A throwback to the workers’ self-management in communist Yugoslavia, autonomy was defined by party officials as both self-rule and economic autarky. The party increasingly viewed this ill-defined concept as the solution to the economic problems facing the Czech Republic, taking up 10% of the program’s contents by 1998. As party officials stated, autonomy was the core of the party’s future programs and policies, the one issue that no other party took up on such a scale.²⁸ The KSČM leadership hoped that it would prove to be the decisive issue in the elections.

Samosprava, however, found little resonance with the electorate. The emphasis on autonomy not only indicated the party's lack of responsiveness, since the party focused on an issue to which no one else paid much attention, but it also made the party’s wider acceptance unlikely. The communists were the only party to advance this issue, and it was never seen as an answer to the challenges of economic reform facing the Czech Republic after 1989. Nor was it credible—the KSČ had earlier denounced similar experiments in Yugoslavia, and had not experimented with such reform before 1989. Neither the broader electorate nor other parties in the parliament took seriously the party's ideas, or its efforts to create new bases for competition. This failure went so deeply as to convince the party leaders that the only rational strategy was to cling to its communist ideals since “no one will believe the change anyway.”²⁹ As a result, the most credible set of appeals the party made by the party was its opposition to many of the features of the post-1989 system.

²⁷ *Hálo Noviny* 28 May 1991, *Hálo Noviny* 28 May 1991, *Pravda* 10 April 1991, statements by Svoboda, Valenčík, and Grebreniček.

²⁸ Svoboda in *Hálo Noviny* 1 July 1992.

²⁹ Valenčík in *Rudé Pravo*, 25 January 1990.

In Slovakia, the political spectrum after 1991 was dominated by the populist Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) and the cleavage it created between “non-standard” parties (populist, authoritarian, and nationalist) and “standard” democratic parties (Szomolányi and Mesežnikov, 1995). The HZDS had a similar heritage to the SDE, since many of its members and founders started their political career in the Communist Party of Slovakia. Since the HZDS was often seen as undemocratic and authoritarian, the SDE emphasized its democratic commitments in its programs partly as a way to distinguish itself from the HZDS.

The SDE tried to focus attention on the party’s defense of democracy, an issue the party hoped would give them an advantage in electoral competition. Unfortunately, this did little to transcend the existing cleavage. Instead, the populism of the HZDS resonated with the voters in ways that the SDE could not. The HZDS did little to gain support for a policy program of economic reforms, and rarely bothered to debate them. Instead, it successfully emphasized both populist appeals and particularist policies that focused on limiting the rights of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia (about 10% of the population) and the influence of international institutions, such as the EU on “state-building” efforts. The SDE could only respond with further defenses of democratic standards, since a pro-minority or anti-“statebuilding” stance would gain it little support. Consequently, the SDE could not out-flank the HZDS. Its commitment to democracy was credible, but the elites did not articulate it in a way that would persuade the voters.

Meanwhile, the SdRP elites in Poland had the skills to create a new dimension of political competition (managerial expertise), and a record of policy reform and negotiation with the opposition under communism that made this set of appeals credible. After 1989, the first

democratic governments in Poland could neither avoid the widespread popular pain their economic reforms caused, nor could they convince the public they were administering the reforms competently. These governments were as fractioned as they were unstable—in the highly fragmented first Polish parliament (29 parties had entered the parliament in 1991), four governments formed and fell before the 1993 elections. Moreover, the Roman Catholic Church, in trying to capitalize on its support in the 1980s, increased the pressure on the parliament in 1990-2 to restrict abortion, introduce religion into schools, and pursue governance in accord with Catholic teaching. The resulting controversies were fertile ground for building new dimensions of competition, focused on government stability, executive competence, and legislative independence.

In response, beginning in 1991, the SdRP's programs increasingly highlighted the party's qualifications. its administrative expertise, its ranks of qualified technocrats, and its stable and moderate stances in comparison with the messy politics of the governmental coalitions. By 1993, content analysis shows that 9% of the program focused on the party's efficacy, experience, and its ability to “get things done professionally,” in contrast to the inefficient and unprofessional squabbling of the post1989 Solidarity activist-led governments. The SdRP repeatedly argued that the Solidarity governments led to a deterioration of the economic and political situation, and that calm, moderate, experienced leadership of the sort provided by the SdRP was necessary to keep both economic reforms and democracy afloat in Poland. Having already developed administrative cadres and skills under communism, the party argued it had the greatest managerial experience.

Given the chaotic nature of parliamentary and cabinet politics in Poland until 1993, such claims found an especially receptive audience. Changing the grounds of party competition to

that of party expertise forced the other parties to answer, and recast the political debate. And, since the party could compete very well on this dimension, with its considerable discipline and administrative experience, the SdRP in effect not only tapped into voter concerns, but made itself a stronger competitor by setting up the very standards it was best suited to meet. These efforts to create new bases for competition were made possible (and subsequently credible) by the party's immensely skilled elites—even its adversaries acknowledged that the party was extremely professional and competent.³⁰ Similarly, the Hungarian MSzP also successfully pursued appeals to competent governance and professional moderation, maximizing consistency and responsiveness, while minimizing the tradeoff in appealing to voters or members.

Thus, in Poland and in Hungary, the successor parties were able to make managerial competence a key electoral issue, and credibly claim they could best provide expertise in administering reforms more sensitively and effectively. In Slovakia, the SDE tried to do the same with its democratic commitment, but was less successful in convincing the electorate. The Czech party also attempted to create a new dimension of party competition, but failed since this appeal was neither resonant nor credible.

Conclusion

Despite earlier verdicts that the communist successors would be unable to transform their programs, the parties examined here made considerable, and consistent, commitments to democracy, party competition, and even a market economy. The extent and kind of their programmatic transformation was largely dependent on earlier organizational decisions. Centralization allowed the parties to focus on policy rather than on party issues and to

³⁰ *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2 April 1993.

respond flexibly to the electorate. Organizational change also reinforced the tradeoff between seeking members and seeking voters—the more a party allowed a retrograde group of members to determine the party's programs, the greater the gap between the party's supporters and the broader electorate.

Centralization made the elites all the more important, both because these new elites were now in charge of party programs, and because efforts to create new dimension of competition would depend on their skill and experience. In short, the programmatic transformation of the communist successor parties depended on the earlier organizational centralization of these parties after 1989, by skilled and experienced elites who not only responded to electoral priorities, but also created new standards for party performance.

Table 1. Average percentage of programs spent on party issues, 1989-1998.

Party	Member Issues	Identity Issues	Total
Czech KSCM	10.2%	16.4%	28.6%
Slovak SDL'	2.6%	8.2%	10.8%
Polish SdRP	5.2%	10.9%	16.1%

Source: Content analysis of party programs.

Table 2. Average gap (over 10 issue areas) between party supporters and the rest of the electorate

Czech KSCM	Slovak SDL'	Polish SdRP	Hungarian MSzP
17.9	8.1	4.2	6.2

Source: Tóka, Gábor. "Party Systems and Electoral Alignments in East Central Europe." Machine readable data. Central European University, 1992- 1996.

Table 3. Mean economic stances

Party	Average Economic Stance	Variance
Czech KSCM	3.09	.224
Slovak SDL'	2.34	.269
Polish SdRP	2.80	.503

Scale: 1-4, with 1 as strongly pro-free market, and 4 as strongly pro-interventionist.

Source: Content analysis of party programs.

Table 4. Mean secular stances of party programs, 1990-1998

Party	Average Secular Stance	Variance
Czech KSCM	1.75	.200
Slovak SDL'	2.00	.222
Polish SdRP	1.17	.167

Scale: 1-4, with 1 as extremely secular, and 4 as extremely anti-secular.

Source: Content analysis of party programs.

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