Authoritarian Determinants of Democratic Party Competition: The Communist Successor Parties in East Central Europe

Forthcoming in *Party Politics*, April/ May 2006

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May 2004

How does the continued presence of authoritarian actors affect political party competition in new democracies? As a major historical holdover from the authoritarian *ancien regime,* what continuing impact do they have on democratic competition, and how do their choices and actions affect other democratic actors?

The scholarly literature so far has not focused on examining this relationship, even as it has analyzed authoritarian legacies, party transformation, and political competition independently of each other. Studies of post-communist politics, in particular, have focused on the economic, political, and cultural inheritances from the communist era. In East Central Europe, legacies of the communist regimes have been found to have an enormous and continuing influence on many aspects of the new democracies (Jowitt 1991, Hanson 1995, Ekiert and Hanson 2003).

Among the most salient examples of such authoritarian persistence are the communist parties in East Central Europe. Most survived the collapse of their rule in 1989-1991 to compete and mobilize voters in the post-1989 democracies, and several were voted back into office. Their survival and return to governance led several analyses to focus on the internal transformations and adaptations that made their democratic success possible (Zubek, 1994, Ishiyama, 1995; Kovacs, 1995; Waller, 1995; Szelenyi et al 1997; Grzymala-Busse 2002). These studies both built on and contributed to the literature on party transformation, and organizational approaches to party transformation (Michels 1911, Duverger 1954, Kitschelt 1984, Koelble 1992, Panebianco 1988, Coppedge 1994, Levitsky 2003.)

Few analyses, however, examined how such transformations would affect other parties, or the patterns of party competition. At the same time, the scholarship on party

competition in the new democracies tended to focus on the new formal institutions. Scholars analyzed the ways in which electoral formulas, legal institutions, and parliamentary or presidential powers determined who competed for and who entered the legislatures, and which viewpoints would be represented (Jasiewicz 1993, Bielasiak 2002, Millard 1994, Birch 2003.) For example, thresholds and vote translation formulas influenced the fragmentation and representativeness of the new party systems. Similarly, electoral institutions that favored competition within republics explain why no party competed throughout the former Czechoslovakia or prevented its breakup in 1993.[1]

What is largely missing is an account of how authoritarian parties and their transformation influenced party competition independently of these formal institutions (see Ishiyama 2001). Yet if the communist parties are the single most salient inheritance from the communist regime, then these parties and their successors ought to have an impact on other political formations and their competitive interactions. After all, the initial balance of power between communist and opposition forces influenced the kind of electoral institutions that arose (Kitschelt 1995; Colomer, 1995; Geddes 1995; Ishiyama 1997; Bernhard 2000) and subsequent reform patterns (Fish 1998, Hellman 1998, Bunce 2003).

The hypothesis explored here is that strategies of the dominant actors of the *ancien regime* can affect the robustness of subsequent democratic party competition. Robustness consists of the degree to which party competition presents a credible threat of replacement to governing parties. Such competition thus fulfills the fundamental role of opposition in a democracy: to present alternatives. Thus, it is clear: elite camps are easily differentiated, and parties have easily distinguishable identities. It is contentious:

[1] To enter parliament, a party had to clear the 5% threshold in *either* the Czech or the Slovak republic.

competitors monitor and publicly critique government actions. Finally, such competition is credible: parties are not excluded *a priori* from coalitions or governance, and are seen by the electorate as capable of governing. Rather than focusing on the number of parties competing or entering office, electoral volatility, or the stability of governments, then, the focus of the present analysis is on how parties *act* in elections and in parliaments.

Ironically, both the exit of the communist parties from power *and* their continued presence as transformed political actors facilitated robust political competition. Communist parties and their successors influenced democratic competition in three ways: first, by initially exiting from power, they allowed the rapid consolidation of democracy as "the only game in town," and competition that did not privilege any actor *a priori.* Second, if communist elites stayed with the communist successor, rather than diffusing into multiple parties, competition was clearer—it was easier for the voters to distinguish parties from each other, and rely on political pedigrees as informational shortcuts. Finally, if the parties regenerated—that is, transformed their organizations and moderated their appeals—they became credible and contentious competitors. They were less likely to be excluded from governance, and they had more capacity to criticize and to present alternatives to governing parties. They then formed the core of a robust competition, both by anchoring the moderate left end of the political spectrum, and by systematically criticizing and forcing other parties to respond.

Below, Section I identifies the communist successors and the variation in party competition. Section II presents the potential explanations offered by the literature. Section III demonstrates the impact of the communist exit and subsequent regeneration on the patterns of political competition.

I. The communist persistence

Across the region, communist parties and their successors persisted in the new democracies.[2] We can divide these parties into three clusters: a) those that exited from power in 1989, regenerated, and returned to govern as moderate democratic parties after an interval out of office, b) those that exited from power and did not transform or return to power, and c) those that did not exit, staying in power through the communist collapse. The cases examined below exemplify the full range of these strategies. Some successors had transformed themselves radically, into moderate Social Democratic parties that were accepted democratic competitors and managers of economic reforms: the Polish SdRP and the Hungarian MSzP were re-elected to power on the strength of their commitment to democracy and managerial expertise.[3] Other communists dispersed into several other parties, with the rump organization transforming itself but not achieving consistent electoral success (Slovak SDL'.) Yet others retained many of their old appeals and old organization. Among these, the Czech KSČM failed to transform, but was forced to exit power. Finally, the Romanian NSF (then PDSR) and the Bulgarian BSP neither transformed nor exited from power, retaining their rule even as the communist regime formally dissolved. What tied all these parties together in the eyes of the electorate was their past, and the considerable antagonism felt towards them by significant sectors of society.

These cases were chosen to maximize the variation on the independent variable, communist party strategy, thus allowing causal inferences with fewer observations and limiting bias introduced by restricting the values of the dependent variable (King,

[2] The exceptions are Latvia and Estonia, where communist parties disappeared after the democratic transition.

Keohane, and Verba 1994). If correct, the analysis should apply to cases where the former authoritarian ruler survives as an entity through the transition, and in parliamentary democracies. Where the ruling party does not survive, there can be no diffusion or regeneration effects, and where parliamentary democracy does not exist, political parties are not the chief agents of contestation and representation. As a result, this analysis has less to tell us about the cases of Latvia or Estonia, where the communist party dissolved entirely, or of Russia and the former Soviet Union countries, where no parliamentary democracy has been established.

Just as the communists acted in distinct ways after 1989, there was considerable variation in the robustness of party competition after the collapse of the communist regimes in 1989. First, as a considerable scholarship has already noted, there are basic differences in the broader levels of democracy achieved within a few years of the communist collapse (see Table 1.)

TABLE 1 HERE

Moreover, even among the "front-runners" of democratic and economic reform, party competition varied in how clear, credible, and contentious it was, and thus how credible a threat of replacement it posed to the governing parties

A clear opposition consisted distinct and distinguishable alternatives, as measured by the distance between the parties' policy stances. As Table 2 shows, parties differentiated themselves more readily in Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic: there was considerably more distance on policy stances among the supporters of different parties than in the other cases for which data is available. Voters had a harder time differentiating among political parties other countries, such as in Bulgaria: party

[3] As were the Slovenian ZSLD and the Lithuanian LDDP, not included in this sample.

supporters and activists tended to be bunched closely together on key policy issues, such as free market reforms.

A credible opposition was seen as capable of governing: that is, it could not be excluded from electoral or government coalitions *a priori.* The greater the percentage of parliamentary seats held by parties excluded from power by their parliamentary counterparts, the fewer the options for alternative governing coalitions, and the greater the security of government in power. In some countries in the region, such as the Czech Republic or Latvia, opposition parties that garnered nearly 20% of the vote (the KSČM and the PCTVL, respectively) were effectively excluded from consideration as potential coalition partners by the others parties. Where parties were excluded from governance in this fashion, their access to policymaking structures was also limited (for example, these parties were excluded from sensitive parliamentary committees and the parliamentary leadership.) As Table 2 shows, the Polish and Hungarian parliaments had considerably lower exclusion rates than their Slovak, Czech, or Romanian counterparts. In Bulgaria, despite the low exclusion rate prompted by the need of the BSP to legitimate its rule,[4] preferential access to media and to state resources meant many opposition parties were heavily, if informally, disadvantaged (Tismaneanu 1996, Ganev 2002.)

TABLE 2 HERE

A contentious opposition had both the will and the access to monitor and to criticize the government from a public forum. This meant not only access to parliamentary and media pulpits, but the capacity to monitor, criticize, and publicize criticisms of the

[4] A formal law against ethnically-based parties did not preclude the Turkish minority's party's (MRF) participation in several governing coalitions. Most notably, the BSP turned to the MRF early on in its rule in an attempt to legitimize its continued hold on power and to disperse policy responsibility. Birch et al, 2003.

governing parties. Here, Polish and Hungarian opposition parties criticized the government constantly in both parliaments and newspapers. Even though the Polish parliament was more volatile and unstable than the Hungarian, with greater rates of party fission and fragmentation, the level of mutual criticism remained high in both countries.

Elsewhere, the opposition issued fewer critiques, and these were less effective. In the Czech Republic, the chief opposition to the ruling ODS party led by Václav Klaus, the Social Democrats (CSSD) was in a weak parliamentary position, with less than 8% of the seats until 1996, and fragmented until 1994. Meanwhile, other parties had way of publicizing any criticism, "for much of the time when Klaus was in office, most of the Czech media followed his line slavishly. There was little unencumbered public debate." (Stroehlein, 1999). In Slovakia, the opposition to the HZDS governments was unable to effectively counter HZDS propaganda, or to unite effectively in its critiques, since the HZDS successfully practiced "divide and conquer" tactics. Opposition parties such as the SDL' flirted with entering HZDS coalitions, and the HZDS attempted to coopt members and leaders of other parties. In Bulgaria and in Romania, the opposition tended to criticize each other far more than the government: for example, the conflict between the "blue" and the "dark blue" (ie, anti-communist and radically so) factions in the Bulgarian opposition took up most of its energy for the early part of the 1990s, allowing the BSP to govern unchecked. The opposition's one credible pressure was to pull out of the elections and the parliament: but as time wore on, this became an increasingly empty threat (Birch et al 2003.) Similarly, in Romania, the first few elections were marked by disunity and incoherence of the opposition, which allowed the DNSF to largely ignore the opposition parties once in parliament (Gallagher 1996).

To summarize, competition was at its most robust in Hungary and in Poland. Despite the considerable governmental instability in Poland, and the populist drift of Fidesz in Hungary, voters perceived several clear alternatives, no party could assume it was secure in parliament, and political competition held governing parties in check. In contrast, in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia, party competition was less robust: while the communists were forced to exit, dominant parties were far more secure in their tenure in office, few credible critics arose, and fewer checks existed on the governing parties. Finally, in Bulgaria and in Romania, competition was less robust still: communists controlled the transition, the electoral alternatives were initially unclear, and the opposition did little to monitor and constrain the governing parties.

This variation matters, for several reasons. Robust political party competition has facilitated economic reform (Hellman, 1998) and it determined how effective rules and institutions guiding parties are in promoting strategic voting and rational party decision-making (Moser, 1999.) Fundamentally, robust competition enhances democratic legitimacy and accountability (Huntington, 1968, Przeworski, 1992.) Where the party system is not robust, voters have had to resort to mass protests (Albania after the collapse of the pyramid schemes in 1996-7) or to referenda and mass mobilization against the ruling party (Slovakia in 1997-8).

II. Alternative Explanations

In explaining these patterns of party competition and the variation in how robust a threat of replacement it presentes, scholars have tended to focus on the structural determinants of party behavior. These include electoral institutions, popular cleavages,

and the impact of previous regime type; these variables have been found to constrain party behavior and party system development.

Formal electoral institutions have been used to explain the number of effective parties and the stability of their interactions (Bielasiak 2002), the institutionalization and stabilization of party systems (Mainwaring and Scully 2001), and the inclusiveness of party competition in representing voters (Birch 2002.) Electoral thresholds, district magnitudes, and party lists offered distinct incentives for party behavior (Moser 1999.) The lower these thresholds, and the higher the district magnitude, the greater the likelihood of party proliferation (Taagapera and Shugert, 1989), which lowers the chance of establishing clear and stable electoral incentives. Higher thresholds and lower magnitude, conversely, lower the number of competing parties and promote the stabilization of the axes of competition, at the price of greater disproportionality (Moraski and Lowenberg, 1997.) Closed party lists also give parties greater control over candidate nomination, since the voters cannot override the parties' prioritization of candidates on the ballot. Therefore, we would expect that in countries with low thresholds, high district magnitudes, and open party lists, robust party competition may be slower to arise, since such institutions lead to a plethora of alternatives that may not be differentiable to the electorate.

However, it is not clear that political institutions alone, however powerful, account for the development of free and robust party competition. The same 5% threshold produced very different competitive configurations in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland after 1993.[5] Similarly, district magnitude is not correlated to party competition,

[5]Similarly, the number of *parliamentary* effective parties, where the influence of the thresholds would be strongest, shrank from 10.2 to 3.9 from 1991 to 1993, but continued to shrink to 3.0 in 1997. In contrast,

nor is it clear that the reductive effect of either thresholds or lowered magnitude would change party behavior in parliament.[6] Party lists were also a relatively weak factor. Open party lists in Poland have not precluded *individual* parties from exercising considerable discipline over their candidates, while the closed party lists have not necessarily promoted greater control over candidates. Thus, the formal institutions examined can reduce the number of opponents, which can indirectly affect clarity, and they can explicitly exclude certain competitors. But these effects are not particularly straightforward in post-communist democracies,[7] and have little effect on either the credibility or the contentiousness of political parties.

Electoral cleavages could be another potential source of robustness: the clarity, credibility, or contentiousness of political parties may be a reflection of voter demands. If parties faithfully reflect their constituencies, then electoral divisions and constituencies may be responsible for the patterns of party competition observed, and the relative levels of party differentiation or exclusion (Evans and Whitefield 1993.) As a result, several scholars have noted that strong electoral cleavages lead to stable and robust competition (Mair 1997, Ordeshook and Shvetsova, 1994, Kitschelt 1992.)

However, for cleavages to structure competition, they rely on linkage mechanisms that transmit voter preferences to party strategists. These, however, were not particularly developed among post-communist parties, most of whom centered their activity in the parliament, and had neither the organizational wherewithal or the willingness to seek out

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Russia has had a 5% threshold, and a mixed electoral system, for all three elections, yet the number of effective electoral parties has ranged from 7.6 in 1993 to 10.7 in 1995 to 7.2 in 1999.

[6] Slovakia had the highest district magnitude, with 37.5 seats per district, Czech Republic followed with 25 seats per district, and Poland in the 1991 elections had 10.6 and in the 1993 elections, 7.5 seats per district (Stanclik, 1997.) Hungary's varied from 4 to 28, for a mean of 6.

[7] Some scholars have reversed the causal arrows, arguing that it is competition itself that strengthens the effect of institutions. (Moser 1999.)

voter instructions. The interactions between party elites and potential constituencies only occasionally gave rise to parties that better represented social cleavages (Racz, 1993, Agh, 1994; Lewis, 1996.) Thus, while elite cleavages were salient, and structured party competition (Toka, 1996), these divisions did not necessarily reflect popular differences of political opinion. Electoral cleavages, no matter how salient or deep, had few transmission mechanisms that would translate popular divisions into patterns of party system robustness.

If neither new institutions nor new cleavages directly translate into robust party competition, historical inheritances may influence party competition. While this literature has not focused on party competition per se, several potential historical legacies affect democratic actors, and thus their competitive interactions. Most saliently, the patterns of opposition to communist rule could have forced communist parties to transform, and clear alternatives to arise (Snyder and Vachudová 1997). Yet it is not clear that communist era opposition is necessary or sufficient for communist party regeneration or for the subsequent structuring of party competition. In the Czech Republic, opposition coded as "strong" did not lead the KSČM to transform itself, or to moderate its appeals. In Slovakia, where the opposition is coded as "weak," the rump of the communist party moderated its appeals and successfully transformed into the SDL'. In both cases, party competition was less robust than in Poland or in Hungary. The opposition could force communist parties to exit power: but it could not determine their subsequent strategies of survival and political behavior, nor could it make competitors more contentious.

The communist regime itself could determine the subsequent quality of party democracy, as some authors have suggested (Markowski 1997, Kitschelt et al 1999.)

However, a fundamental problem with "regime type" as an explanation for either party strategy or robustness of competition is that it is too broad an analytical category. Communist regimes changed over time: the Czechoslovak communist regime during the brief interlude of the Prague Spring in 1968 was very different from the Stalinist repression of 1953 (or the post-1968 "normalization.") Similarly, the Hungarian orthodoxy of the Stalinist period has little in common with the relatively liberal "goulash communism" after 1960. Thus, while certain aspects of regime policy certainly increased the likelihood of a negotiated exit from power, as in Poland and in Hungary, the type of communist regime present prior to the democratic transition itself does not directly or clearly account for the party strategies adopted afterwards.

III. Mechanisms and Outcomes

If neither electoral institutions alone, nor broad historical legacies, can explain the variation in robustness of party competition, how do we account for the relationship between communist party strategies and the nature of competition after the collapse of their rule?

As several scholars noted, the new political structures after 1989 were endogenous to the existing players (Kitschelt 1995; Colomer, 1995; Geddes 1995; Bernhard 2000). The very actors who stood to participate, compete, and benefit in the new democracies also set up both the formal rules of the game (electoral institutions and legal arrangements), and the informal advantages that privileged some actors over others (media access, favorable districting, political guarantees, persistence of elite allies). Even where the system collapsed, the old rulers and their opposition negotiated (Przeworski 1992; Elster 1996).

The communist parties were in a privileged position to shape democratic political competition for two reasons. First, they were the inevitable negotiation partners: the opposition took many forms, but it faced the ruling party in all cases. Thus, even if their fates after 1989 varied, they had a considerable impact on the new institutional architecture. Second, they had key advantages: access to organizational resources and material assets the nascent opposition could only hope for. If not divested of these, communist parties had an automatic lead in voter mobilization, and both formal and informal advantages would continue to privilege the communists. They were thus in a position to shape both the institutional framework, and the substance of competition that took place within it.

Subsequently, the communist parties' strategies of adaptation to democracy further influenced how robust the competition would become. To summarize, their concentration in one party had a polarizing effect, as voters could more easily identify each party by pedigree. This also promoted a more rapid focus on economic and cultural policy questions, rather than on nationalist outbidding (Snyder and Vachudová 1997). Their regeneration, and subsequent return to office, meant they could become the key counterweight to the new democratic governments, creating a credible and contentious threat of replacement to governing parties and spurring others to issue such critiques themselves. This set of strategic moves, and their impact, is summarized in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1 HERE.

Freedom of Competition

First, where the communist rulers left power during the transition, all the competitors stood more of an even chance. As noted earlier, the subsequent rejection of the

communist system in the first elections was associated both with greater democratic consolidation, and with free market reforms (Fish, 1998.) Where the communist party rapidly admitted its defeat and exited governance, several mechanisms were set into motion, eventually producing these positive outcomes. First, the communist party lost much of its power to dominate formal institutional creation, and was divested of many of its formal assets, both of which would have privileged the communist party vis-à-vis its potential competitors.

Secondly, it lost many of its informal advantages: while communist managers could still "spontaneously" privatize state enterprises, the party as a whole lost its privileged access to state resources, and the potential they carried for building popular support and undermining competitors through patronage, media control, and the like. In addition, the communist exit was a powerful mobilizing signal to the potential opposition that new opportunities were opening up, and that considerable power was now up for grabs. The full exit of the communist parties was thus a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for a robust party competition.

In both Hungary and in Poland, the communist parties attempted to hold on to the advantages of power by liberalizing the communist system enough to ensure its survival in the spring and summer of 1989. They nonetheless had to exit power, the result of an emboldened opposition and societal demands (Bruszt and Stark 1991, Elster 1996, Bernhard 2000). As a result, communist party proposals that were expected to benefit the communists either failed to have the expected effect (as in the case of the formal electoral institutions), or they were rejected outright (as in the case of the late communist proposals that parties only rely on funds they already possess.)

In Hungary, the communist party itself began to fragment and to dissolve as the Opposition Round Table got underway. By the time the Hungarian communist party dissolved itself in the October of 1989, fully free elections had been agreed upon for the spring of 1990. The communist party received less than 10% of the vote, and duly ceded power to the opposition. In Poland, the Round Table negotiations of 1989 initially resulted in electoral quotas that gave the parliamentary advantage to the communists.[8] Within months of the semi-free election of June1989, however, the entire deal was renegotiated, after their parliamentary allies, the PSL and SD, abandoned the communists and they lost the ability to govern. The 1989 electoral law was scrapped, in favor of a fully free and highly permissive replacement. The first fully free elections of 1991 thus confirmed, rather than led to, the communist exit. In both Poland and in Hungary, the formal institutional framework was negotiated and re-negotiated to ensure equality for the competitors, and the communist exit itself prevented informal entrenchment.

When the communist regime collapsed in Czechoslovakia in November 1989, rapid negotiations took place between the opposition and the communist party. Emboldened by the election of Václav Havel for president in December 1989, the opposition drew a harder bargain. As a result, the June 1990 elections were fully free, and greatly reduced the communist presence in the legislature. No competitor had the built-in advantages of controlling the media, access to state funding, the electoral boards, or the electoral outcomes. State bureaucrats also had less time to convert their political power into economic assets.

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[8]65% of the seats in the lower house (Sejm) reserved for the communist party and its satellites, as was the presidency. The freely-elected Senate was chosen under majoritarian formulas, to better represent the communists. These were also the first negotiations to take place in the region between the communist party

Conversely, the longer the communist party stayed in office, the more it could continue to draw informal benefits and create formal institutional advantages. The first preference of communist parties was to stay in power, continuing their clientelist relationships to society (Colomer, 1994). If they could not retain power, their next preference was to try to undercut programmatic parties, given that their advantage lay in patronage and side payments (Kitschelt, 1995.) A communist party that stayed in power thus continue to draw material and political benefits from office, especially since the communist state and the party had earlier fused (Fish, 1998.) Such parties could build in competitive advantages, such as institutions favoring big parties, state funding based on organizational strength, etc.

Where the communist party managed the transition, it was able to privilege its position, both under the guise of electoral laws designed to "stabilize" competition and through informal drawing of privilege. Thus, in Bulgaria, electoral laws initially favored major parties (ie, the communist successors) with a half-PR, half- majoritarian system, and state funds were given only to parties with more than 50,000 votes, further privileging the communist party. The party continued to use its informal advantages, so that allegations of vote manipulation, suspiciously high turnout (about half a million extra votes were probably cast), and outright fraud surfaced after the June 1990 elections (Birch et al 2002). Formal institutions eventually became more equitable: as the opposition gained in strength, and threatened to withdraw from the October 1991 elections (an outcome the communists were eager to avoid, as it would delegitimize their rule), compromises led to more PR seats, and to the parliamentary elections of the

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and the opposition, and as such, were marked by hesitation on both sides, lest the Soviet Union intervene. See (Bernhard, 2000).

president, which eventually evened out the playing field. However, the BSP continued to accrue informal advantages it first gained in the transition, "carrying off" state assets into private hands via party-controlled informal networks that remained in the state regulatory, information, and financial sectors (Ganev, 2002.)

The more completely a communist party dominated the transition, the more able it was to favor itself both through formal institutions and through informal practices. Thus, in Romania, "political insiders retained the inititative." (Gallagher 1996) The communist National Salvation Front initially promised it would not stand in the June 1990 free elections, and announced a proportional representation system with a low 3% threshold that would ostensibly benefit the weak opposition (Crampton, 1997.) However, the NSF then reneged on this promise, insisted on a strong presidency, and used both physical intimidation and isolation by the official state media of the competition to ensure a communist victory. State funding was given to parties only if they received 5% of the vote, and parliamentary parties received twice as much media time as non-parliamentary parties. This combination of democratic rhetoric and authoritarian actions skewed the field (Tismaneanu, 1997) Not surprisingly, the communist presidential candidate and leader of the NSF, Ion Iliescu, won 85% of the presidential vote, and the NSF, 66% of the vote. Iliescu then began to rule the country by diktat (Tismaneanu, 1997), and the communists under their various guises (NSF, DNSF, PDSR) continued in power until 1996.

In short, the communist exit was important not only for the formal institutional space it opened up, promoting the rise of institutions that favored no player *ex ante,* but also for its informal aspects. Communist parties lost their privileged position, and their ability to

continue to benefit privately en masse from public assets and institutions. While their personal networks continued, they were cut off from access to the state at key points: communist party officials could no longer discretionarily enforce laws, overlooking acts that benefited their own. Without exiting from power, the communist parties could lock in informal advantages *and* delay the creation of formal institutions that favored no particular interest. Moreover, since the resources of the state were both finite and limited, those who had early access to state authority could extract from the state far more than the relative "latecomers." These mechanisms fostered both the greater reform success associated with the communist exit, and the subsequent rise of robust party competition.

Party differentiation and policy alternatives

Second, *how* the communist party elites left power influenced party differentiation. If they either stayed in power and coopted other elites into the communist successor, or if they diffused into multiple other parties, the competing parties could not differentiate themselves easily. If the party elites were indistinguishable, it became harder for voters to coordinate their expectations regarding the parties' programmatic profiles, and to distinguish between the parties (Kitschelt et al 1999.)

In the post-communist cases, an initial precondition for clear competition consisted of the rise of two camps, with their origins in the communist successors and in the anti-communist opposition, respectively. Given the chaos of the transition, this separation was a fundamental way for voters and other parties to orient themselves. Initial electoral distinctions were drawn chiefly on the basis of political pedigree, not well-established policy records. Where the communist party elites diffused into multiple parties, or where they did not exit during the transition, the boundaries between the two camps were

blurred, as was the case in Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania. Voters had greater difficulties telling apart political parties if many contained the same familiar elites.

Just as importantly, where parties contained a large number of *ancien regime* elites, it was harder for them to denounce the previous regime and to build an intra-party consensus on the necessity of policy reforms. If the elites had not clearly separated out themselves, the process of denouncing past policies and proposing new policy solutions was delayed. Communists that retained power in the transition, or who had diffused into multiple parties, had little incentive to formulate clear policy alternatives. Promoting policy reforms would not only undermine the communists' position within the state, but denounce their very historical record—in other word, delegitimize them as democratic politicians. As a result, where communists diffused into several parties, these parties were unlikely to hold up the banner of radical reform.

In Poland, the Czech Republic, and in Hungary, the communists did not diffuse into multiple parties. This was the result not just of the strength of the opposition, as Snyder and Vachudová argue (1997), but also of the communist party record: where the communist party had discredited itself prior to 1989, through incompetence or repression (as it did in Poland or in the Czech Republic), the subsequent "regime divide" between the opposition and the communist party made it difficult for their elites to cooperate within the same political formation. It was not the opposition strength per se: the Czech opposition was tiny, and the Hungarian was far less numerous than the Polish Solidarity. Rather, what mattered was the sharpness of the boundary between the opposition and the communists—the extent to which the former had criticized and differentiated themselves

from the latter prior to 1989. The subsequent electoral deadweight that communist elites would have brought to opposition parties precluded elite diffusion.

Thus, in Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic, the opposition had denounced communist shortcomings so vehemently that these parties could not accept communist elites without paying a heavy electoral price in the first free elections and thereafter. Several leaders of historical parties, such as the Czech ČSSD or the Polish PPS, initially staked their political standing on refusing to accept communists into party ranks.[9] Communist elites thus had difficulties dispersing into other parties, which then could criticize the communist record and thus differentiate themselves. The result was the bigger policy distances between the parties, and the greater clarity of alternatives for voters, as Table 2 shows.

In contrast, in Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania, clear boundaries between parties took longer to emerge. When they did, they were on the basis of nationalist and ethnic outbidding, rather than on the traditional policy issues of market stances and religious-cultural issues that dominated politics in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary. The opposition, insofar as it existed, had not sharply differentiated itself from the communists prior to 1989, nor were their critiques enough to discredit the communists. As a result, the latter could disperse into and co-found numerous new parties, with little hostility from the non-communist camp. As a result, in Slovakia and elsewhere, the dispersal of communists into several parties, such as the HZDS, SNS, SDL', and ZRS meant that the

[9] This was the source of enormous controversies within the historical democratic parties revived after 1993, especially those on the traditional Left. Until 1993, the Czech Social Democrats refused to accept either communist activists or communist members: it was only then, with the change of the party leadership to Miloš Zeman, that communists were allowed in.

new elites consisted of a "combination of dissidents and 'laundered communists'." (Innes, 1997: 406)

Such dispersal meant that there would be fewer actors in whose interest it would be to consistently and credibly critique the communist record, or the communist party itself.[10] To do so would be to call their own records into question. Many politicians instead chose to exploit national grievances and populist appeals, instead of clear policy divisions. Most notably, Vladimir Mečiar went over from the communist party to the opposition Public Against Violence in 1989, and then founded the rather ironically-named Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), which managed to dominate Slovak politics from 1991 to 1998 with a mixture of nationalism, populism, intimidation, and a disrespect for minority and civic rights. Similarly, the "laundered" communists in Bulgaria and especially in Romania diffused into multiple parties, initially even creating rather than responding to opposition forces.[11] Such diffusion meant that many parties, constrained by their own historical records, subsequently turned to nationalist mobilization in lieu of policy differentiation.

Credible and Contentious Opponents

If their exit and diffusion promoted the rise of fair and clear competition, communist party regeneration would greatly increase the communist successors' credibility and ability to criticize other political parties. While the regenerated communist parties were not the only choice for voters, they were a direct and obvious alternative that would foster robust competition. As argued below, regeneration both influenced the ideological

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[10] The one party to claim non-communist "purity" were the Christian Democrats, who were hampered by their leader, Jan Carnogursky, who frequently managed to alienate potential allies and supporters.
[11] See Georgi Karasimeonov 1996.

distribution in each country, and ensured the communist successors' ability to effectively monitor and constrain democratic governments.

Regeneration consisted of the moderation of programs, transformation of organization and symbols, and resulted in eventual acceptance as centrist democratic competitors (Grzymala-Busse 2002). It was neither the response to existing opposition (Vachudová and Snyder 1997) nor was it simply a result of the communist exit (Fish 1998). These factors were an incentive to change, but neither determined the capacity to change, nor its direction. Rather, regeneration a direct consequence of individual elite capacities: the same endowments that allowed elites to streamline and transform the parties would prove important in developing convincing and effective criticisms of governing parties. They could effectively use the parliamentary and mass media channels to differentiate themselves from their opposition, and to point out the shortcomings of other parties. In so doing, they forced other parties to defend themselves and to sharpen their own critiques, making for more robust party competition.

There were two mechanisms by which communist regeneration fostered a credible and critical opposition. First, regeneration allowed the communist successor to occupy the moderate left end of the spectrum, and pre-empt the success of other parties. Where communist parties regenerated fully, in Poland and in Hungary, no social democratic parties arose. Where communist parties did not regenerate, as in the Czech Republic, they continued with Marxist or radical protest appeals, leaving considerable room for moderate social democratic alternatives. These, however, had to arise ab novo, handicapped by organizational weakness, low electoral support, and tiny parliamentary representations for years to come. This was the case with the Czech Social Democrats,

who became a powerful opposition only 7 years into the transition. They started with a very weak position—4% to 7% of the vote in the 1990 and 1992 elections, respectively—but were able to slowly gather electoral support in view of the Czech communist successor's narrow protest orientation. By 1996, the Social Democrats won over a quarter of the votes; but until then, the ODS hegemony faced little credible challenge. Where communist elites diffused or communist successors failed to regenerate, there was less "moderate left" space to occupy, since the axes of competition centered on nationalist outbidding and basic questions of the desirability of democratic procedures. Official social democratic parties, such as the Slovak SDSS or the Romanian PSDR, could not clear electoral thresholds and enter parliament.

Second, regeneration meant parliamentary access and the capacity to credibly and contentiously criticize the governing parties. The regenerated communist successors constantly criticized the shortcomings of the non-communist governments (and in so doing defended their own existence and accomplishments.) At the same time, they offered credible claims of democratic commitment and managerial competence: claims that were especially striking in the light of the instability and inexperience of the first few years of democratic governance after the communist collapse. As a result, where the successors had regenerated, as in Poland and in Hungary,[12] they became the core alternative to the governing parties: both clear and credible options, vociferously critical of the instability and incompetence they perceived. Given the clear dividing line that ran between the two camps, governments were rendered vulnerable, and electorates faced a meaningful choice (Bartolini 2000). Even as governments changed, the post-communist option was consistently on offer, and garnered widespread popular support.

Without such full-fledged regeneration, communist successors could not gain the access in parliament and the public credibility to help threaten governing parties with replacement. In turn, without a credible and contentious critic to hold governing parties in check, we observe the dominance of one party, and considerable difficulties with formulating clear opposition claims. For example, in the Czech Republic, the post-communist KSČM could do little to oppose the ruling ODS, which governed in one guise or another from 1990 to 1998 (and then became the crucial pillar for the 1998-2002 minority government of the Social Democrats.) It had neither the parliamentary access, nor the elite capacities to credibly and contentiously criticize the government. In Slovakia, similarly, opposition parties had considerable difficulties mounting a challenge to the HZDS dominance from 1991 to 1998. The SDL' did transform itself considerably, but continually changed addressed constituencies and flirted with entering a coalition with the HZDS. As a result, it did not offer a credible alternative critical of the ruling party.

Thus, without a communist regeneration, a single political actor could continue to dominate the political scene, and draw the kind of private benefits and questionable policy decisions that we observe in the Czech Republic (Appel 2001). Needless to say, the situation was made all the worse where the communist parties did not exit from power: there, the BSP was reelected in Bulgaria in 1991 and 1994, and the Romanian PDSR ruled until 1996: their continued rule meant that even if other parties entered office, the political institutions were fragile, and vulnerable to constant tinkering and discretion. The media, rather than serving as a forum for public debate, was seen by the ruling parties as one of the pillars of power and little parliamentary criticism was

[12] Other out-of-sample cases of regeneration include Slovenia and Lithuania.

successfully mounted (Gallagher 1996, Karasimeonov 1996) In short, through their parliamentary access, capacity to monitor and criticize, and public credibility, the regenerated communist successors were one key source of a threat of replacement to the governing parties.

Even as they offered an alternative to the governing parties that were their chief opponents, regenerated communist successors contributed to general policy consensus on democracy and market reform in three ways. First, their campaign appeals and programs did not question the need for democracy and market reform, but how to best administer it. Secondly, once they returned to govern, this time freely elected, these parties further stabilized both the political party system and the policy consensus by continuing the economic and administrative reforms of their predecessors (Bartlett, 1995, Blazyca and Rapacki, 1995.) A third indirect outcome of the communist regeneration, and the political competition it offered, was the lower rate of rent-seeking. In Hungary and in Poland, attempts at rent-seeking were constrained both by their opponents' immediate airing of any dirty laundry, and by the credible threat of replacement posed by the opposition. This threat led all parties to institute a slew of formal state reforms relatively early on in the transition, in an attempt to prevent their opponents from taking advantage of the benefits of office. In the other cases examined, whether the Czech Republic or Romania, dominant governing parties could extract private benefits more freely from the state, and precluded the introduction of formal state reforms that could have insulated the state from such predation (Grzymala-Busse 2003.)

Conclusion

Communist successor parties thus influenced the robustness of party competition through their exit, dispersion, and regeneration. This is not to say that the communist parties *determined* all aspects of competition, or that their influence did not wane over the years. Other political actors learned and gained experience in parliamentary and electoral maneuvering, and international pressures (such as the prospect of European Union membership) curbed and constrained political competition as well. However, since they were the biggest players in the authoritarian era, and continued to participate in democratic politics, they were in a position to heavily influence the initial development of party competition, both through formal institutions and informal practices.

The considerable impact of the communist successor strategies on democratic competition has three implications for research on political parties. First, it refocuses our attention on the *informal* aspects of party competition, and the ways in which parliamentary exclusion, informal networks, access to informal resources can all privilege some parties over others and affect electoral and policy outcomes. Informal practices and institutions, such as parliamentary ostracism, or the diffusion of elites into other parties, were often a better predictor of political outcomes than their more formal counterparts, such as coalition numerical considerations or electoral thresholds. Ironically, these informal practices often were far more entrenched than formal institutions, whose pliability was shown again and again, as the Polish, Romanian, and Slovak electoral systems were repeatedly changed.

Second, while much attention has focused on the structural determinants of democratic performance, whether economic preconditions, historical experiences, or "getting the institutions right," the impact of communist successors on party competition

suggests that party agency plays an important role. While the communist exit from power was less a choice than a necessary response, the decisions to diffuse and to regenerate are attributable to individual elites. Like all actors, they did not operate in a vacuum: but neither are their actions fully or directly determined by existing structural determinants, such as formal institutions or broad regime legacies.

Subsequently, even as they responded to the formal institutional incentives, both communist successors and other parties fused and split, changed their ideological orientations, and formed anew. Even the most established parties in the democratic front-runner countries made unexpected yet highly influential moves (see, for example, the populist shift of the liberal Fidesz, the fragmentation of the SLD in Poland, or the ODS in the Czech Republic.) Again, these are traceable less to formal institutions, than to elite ideas and disagreements, to personal misgivings and political aspirations, and to calculations based not on direct institutional constraints, but on individual endowments and reputations.

Finally, the large and important literature on party transformation has understandably focused on the changes in party organizations, programs, and policies as its analytical endpoint. Yet the influence of the communist successors on the robustness of party competition in East Central Europe suggests that it may be useful to examine party transformation as an independent causal variable, and trace its effects on other parties and party competition. The transformation of major parties is likely to affect the calculations of other actors: the electoral choices of voters, the coalition preferences of other parties, etc. If changes in the competitive situation prompt parties to transform, their actions then feed back into party competition, and the extent to which it offers a credible threat of replacement to governing parties.

Table 1. Freedom House Rating of Fairness in Elections and Political Freedoms (1: free, 7: fully repressive: [13]

Country	Hungary	Poland	Czech	Slovakia	Bulgaria	Romania
1990	2	2	N/a	N/a	3	6
1994	2	2	2	2	2	4
1998	1.25	1.25	1.25	3.5	3.5	3.25
2002	1	1	1	2.0	1	2

Table 2. Variation in Party Competition

Robust Competition:	Clear?[14]	Credible?	Contentious?
Hungary	Communist exit, 1.14 mean policy distance between contiguous parties	1% exclusion rate[15], No dominant party	Yes: constant mutual critique In press and in parliament
Poland	Communist exit, 1.10	3% exclusion rate, No dominant party	Yes: constant mutual critique In press and in parliament
Czech Rep	Communist exit, 1.62	19% exclusion rate, ODS as dominant party until 2002	Belatedly: critique starts in '94-5 Few critiques in press
Slovakia	Communist exit,	7% exclusion rate, HZDS as dominant party until 1998	Yes: critique, but inconsistent
Bulgaria	No communist exit. .42	0% exclusion rate, BSP as dominant party until 1997	No: no effective critique.
Romania	No communist exit. N/a	7% exclusion rate, PDSR as dominant party until 1996	No: no effective critique.

[13] Source: Freedom House, *Nations in Transit.*Washington, DC: Freedom House, 1998.
[14] Mean policy distance among contiguous parties on the most salient policy issue in post-communist countries under consideration: privatization. Data from Gabor Toka, author's own calculations.
[15] Calculated as the % of seats held by parties excluded *a priori* from governance or coalitions by the other parties.