Party Systems in Central and Eastern Europe. Is there the Baltic exceptionism?

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Abstract

The Baltic countries are often under-explored in the studies on party systems in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Therefore few scholars take a notice of several peculiar features of the Baltic party politics, which put them apart from the CEE mainstream. The paper puts forward an argument that two Baltic countries, Latvia and Estonia (but not Lithuania) turn out to be rather exceptional in CEE if the more sociological and historical perspective for the party system analysis would be employed. Both countries have a rather unique dominant cleavage constellation in which the ethnic cleavage is effectively merged with communist-anti-communist cleavage. It has lead to the party system in which communist-successor parties are almost absent or marginal, the left-wing parties rather weak and the whole party competition ideologically un-balanced and the rightist-inclined. An additional notable aspect what catch the eye is a peripheral status of state-church cleavage and marginal position of the parties with moral-religious agendas. While the virtual absence of church-state cleavage could be explained with the Protestant cultural background, the peculiar cleavage constellation, in which the ethnic divide is interlinked with communist-anti-communist cleavage, has its roots in a specific legacy of the communist rule – called as foreign-hegemonic communism. The new regime type proposed would be treated as a conceptual innovation into the theory already developed by H. Kitchelt (1999). The specific mechanisms of cleavage formation under foreign-hegemonic communism are able to provide a quite convincing explanation for the particularity of Latvia and Estonia. Although the analysis supports the exceptionalism thesis, the question on the Baltic exceptionality needs for further consideration, because exceptionalism is always a contextual and interpretative category in the party system analysis.

Introduction

Majority of the studies on the party systems in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)\(^1\) have been predominately concentrated on the big countries (the Visegrad countries: Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia). Scholars usually extend the results drawn form the Visegrad group to the whole CEE and thus often neglect smaller countries, which patterns of party competition are often different. Particularly the Baltic countries tend to be distinct from the CEE mainstream in various key dimensions.

\(^1\) CEE countries are defined as the new EU member states in the context of the current study. All other Central and Eastern European countries are excluded in order to avoid the comparative analysis to become too overcrowded.
The current paper puts forward the argument, that two Baltic counties, Latvia and Estonia (but not Lithuania), stand out as special cases in CEE and therefore the question will be raised, whether we can really talk about the Baltic exceptionalism.

Exceptionalism is not a widely exploited concept in the party system studies and most of the scholars have applied it to analyze the party politics in US (e.g. Epstein, 1980; Rae, 2006). Whether we regard the particular party system to be exceptional or not, depends on the reference points we take. For example in comparison with the Northern European party systems, which are often considered to be as a normative standard for West European party systems, the French and especially the Italian patterns of party competition seems to be very peculiar or even exceptional indeed (Lane & Ersson, 1999). Some scholars have also drawn attention to some countries in CEE, which party politics appears to be more or less incompatible with the CEE mainstream (e.g. Poland and Czech Republic).

The Baltic countries are often under-explored and therefore very little attention is paid to their peculiarities. Latvia and Estonia are the only countries among the new EU member states in which post-communist successor parties didn’t survive or they are playing an utterly marginal role in today’s party politics. Even left-wing parties and social democrats are quite puny – an additional feature, what makes Latvia and Estonia dissimilar with the big CEE countries, which party competition is usually ideologically more balanced. Because Estonia and Latvia are the only Protestant countries in CEE, the state-church cleavage is not accentuated in their party politics, which is also quite uncommon in the post-communist world, where state-church cleavage is often playing quite a prominent role (McAllister & White, 2007).

Distinctive features for Estonia and Latvia, listed above, could be explained by the idiosyncratic cleavage constellations, which have their own historical roots. Herbert Kitschelt and his colleagues (1999) have classified all three Baltic States as the countries with the legacies of patrimonial communism and national-accommodative communism. That kind of mixed regime legacy was expected to produce a cleavage constellation in which socio-cultural divide (conflict between religious national-authoritarian camp on the one hand and secular-cosmopolitan-libertarian camp on the other hand) and ethnic cleavage would become dominant. Nevertheless, the patterns of party politics in the Baltic countries are not providing a full support for Kitschelt’s theory. In Lithuania rather communist-anti-communist cleavage has been essential (Jurkynas, 2004; Ramonaite, 2006), while in Latvia and Estonia ethnic cleavage is a
principal divide indeed, but it has not evolved according to scenario prescribed by Kitschelt.

The paper seeks to revise Kitschelt’s theory and puts forward an argument, that Latvia and Estonia could be classified as a distinctive sub-type of communist regime legacy, called as *foreign-hegemonic communism*. The regime type comprises predominately the features of bureaucratic-authoritarian communism and some aspects of national-accommodative communism. However, it also encompasses some unique features, which will be described in the paper. The distinct regime legacy is able to provide a good explanation for the absence of communist-successor parties and weakness of left-wing parties in the Latvian and Estonian party politics. More deep-rooted historical aspects will explain the weakness of state-church cleavage and marginality of the parties with religious-moral agenda.

The paper will also prove that Lithuania turns out to be different from its Baltic neighbors in all respect and tends to be more similar to the Visegrad countries and converges quite nicely with the CEE mainstream.

The structure of the paper will be as follows: in the first section we will provide an general overview on concept of exceptionalism in party system analysis and introduce the analytical strategies how to track for the exceptionalism; in the second section we will concentrate on the Baltic cases and demonstrate that according to commonly used indicators for of the party system analysis (stability, fragmentation) the Baltic countries are no way exceptional in CEE, but while employing the deeper historical-sociological perspective, Latvia and Estonia stand out as special cases; in the remaining part of the paper we will seek explanation for the Baltic exceptionality, while outlining the revised theoretical perspective basing on the theory proposed by Kitschelt. In the end of the paper it will be discussed again whether the distinctive features pointed out were sufficient enough in order to talk about the Baltic exceptionalism and what would be the intrinsic value of that kind of sociological and historical analysis.

### 1.1. Exceptionalism in party system analysis

The American exceptionalism and related studies are deeply rooted into the mainstream political analysis (Lipset, 1996). Most of the studies take a holistic perspective and do not concentrate just on parties, but explore the peculiarities of the
American political system in general (strong presidency balanced by equally powerful Congress, federal system, political culture, etc.). Nevertheless, references on the American party politics occupy a substantial place in the argumentation. It has been suggested that parties in America are notably different from the European democracies on their loose and fragmented organizational structure, financing, leadership, historical roots, ideologies, voter behavior, etc. (e.g. Campbell, 1980; Hershey & Beck, 2003; Lipset & Marks, 2000; Reichley, 2000).

In the European context the particular countries’ exceptionality has not been so widely explored. Usually European countries are considered to be quite dissimilar to each other, thus the pretensions for the strong exceptionality do not sound very convincing. However, it has been often noted that for instance the Italian party politics has been rather exceptional in the Western European context, because its fragmented, polarized structure of party competition and strong populist drives (Sartori & Mair, 2005; Shin & Agnew, 2008). Some Anglophone authors make the similar point on the French case, underlining the internal instability and the peculiar segmentation of the French party system (Cole, 2005).

In the context of CEE the scholars have pointed out only some countries, which party politics seems to be in contrast to the post-communist mainstream. For example Poland has been highlighted due to its strong anti-party sentiments in the society, pronounced religions-moral dimension in the party politics and frequent splits of the parliamentary parties (Szczerbiak, 2006; Tworzecki, 1996). Czech Republic has been considered to be the most “Western” among CEE countries and therefore rather exceptional (Deegan-Krause, 2006; Kopecký, 2007). Some students have draw attention to the Latvian case, which has been the most unstable party system in the whole CEE and unusual because the prominent role played by the business oligarchs in the party politics (Pabriks & Stokenberga, 2006; Sikk, 2004).

None of the authors analyzing either the Western European or Eastern European party politics, have really attempted to conceptualize the exceptionalism and to set any criteria or clear measures for it. However, the further exploration of the relevant literature demonstrates, that assessments on the exceptionality depend very much on the context and the reference points we take. Thus the particular country’s party politics is believed to be exceptional if its patterns of party competition differ from the regions’ mainstream or from the common patterns found in the neighboring countries in several key dimensions.
Hence, assessments on the exceptionalism are always rather indicative and context-dependant.

Nevertheless, even that kind of un-formalized analysis on the exceptionalism is expected to be somewhat systematic. At that point we must turn to the wider theoretical frameworks used for party system analysis. One could distinguish between two major approaches or analytical strategies:

1. **Formal system level analysis**, which is focused on the major (rather formal) patterns of party competition and occasionally explores institutional rules and organizational aspects (e.g. Blondel, 1969; Mair, 1998; Sartori & Mair, 2005; Siaroff, 2000; Wolinetz, 1988).

2. **Sociological-historical approach**, which concentrates on the social base of party support, putting emphasis on the cleavages and divides in the given society and explores their formation and implications for the party system (e.g. Bartolini & Mair, 1990; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967; Ware, 1996).

There is no doubt that two approaches are deeply interlinked with each other and many scholars employ them in complementary manner. In order to identify whether the particular countries’ patterns of party competition are truly out of the mainstream in comparison with the other countries in the given region, we ought to carry out the systematic analysis on both perspectives. To put this another way, we are expected to explore both some formal but critical characteristics of the party competition (formal system level analysis) and then to take the sociological-historical perspective in order to dig deeper into the foundations of the party systems.

### 1.2. System level analysis – there is no the Baltic exceptionalism

Most of the comparative studies on the party systems both in Western Europe and CEE are putting emphasis on two major dimensions, what are expected to capture the essence of party competition: stability and fragmentation (Broughton & Donovan, 1999; Jungerstam-Mulders, 2006; Lane & Ersson, 2007).

Various indicators have been used in order to measure the stability of party systems: electoral volatility, the number of new parties represented in the parliament and their average yield of votes in elections, Party Vote Share Concentration Index and dynamics of government–opposition relationships, etc. (Bakke & Sitter, 2005; Horowitz & Browne, 2005; Lewis, 2000; Tavits, 2005, 2008). Yet the most widely
applied measure has been electoral volatility (Bartolini & Mair, 1990; Sikk, 2005). We use the Pedersen index, which is often considered to be the most widely applied index in the studies of electoral volatility.

Tabel 1. Electoral volatility 1990 – 2011 in the Baltic States and in remaining part of CEE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Electoral volatility 1990 - 2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>24,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>34, 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>43,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean (the Baltic States)</td>
<td><strong>33,9</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>32,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>28,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>38,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>29,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>27,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>34,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>30,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean (the rest of CEE, the Baltic States excluded)</td>
<td><strong>31,6</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (Caramani & Biezen, 2007), (Dassonneville & Hooghe, 2011), and the author’s calculations. Note: Figures indicate total volatility without others (TVWO), including parties that obtained at least two percent of the vote. Volatility is calculated using the ‘Pedersen index’ (1979): Total Volatility = Σ |P\textsubscript{i}t−P\textsubscript{i}t+1|/2, where P is the percentage of votes for parties ‘i’ to ‘n’ in elections ‘t’ and ‘t+1’.

According to table 1, electoral volatility in the Baltic States doesn’t differ very much from the remaining part of CEE (the Visegrad countries and the Balkans). It has been slightly higher than in rest of CEE, but there are no empirical evidences to suggest that the Baltic countries are somehow exceptional.

Additionally to electoral volatility, the fragmentation has been the second key variable frequently examined. Commonly used measure for party system fragmentation has been effective number of electoral parties (ENEP) based on the Laakso and Taagepera index (Laakso & Taagepera, 1979).

Tabel 2. Effective number of electoral parties in the Baltic States and in remaining part of CEE (1990 – 2011).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Effective number of electoral parties (ENEP) 1990-2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>6,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>6,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean (the Baltic States)</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean (the rest of CEE, the Baltic States excluded)</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (Gallagher, 2012), and the author’s calculations.

The data presented at table 2 demonstrates, that regardless the fact, that party systems in the Baltic countries are slightly more fragmented than in other CEE countries, the divergences are not very remarkable. The fragmentation of the Baltic party systems is effectively comparable with Slovakia, Slovenia and Poland. Again, there is no reason to confirm the Baltic exceptionalism thesis.

Additionally to the indicators of stability and fragmentation we can take a brief look at some other dimensions regularly used for studies of party politics at the general systemic level.

Regarding the institutional framework, the Baltic countries are not out of the CEE mainstream. Latvia and Estonia are using PR system, which is widespread among most of the new EU member states in Eastern Europe (Birch, 2002; Pettai & Kreuzer, 2001). Lithuania has introduced the mixed electoral system, which is also not very unique (rather similar to the electoral system in Hungary).

Concerning the funding of political parties, all three countries have introduced the state financing for parties (Roper & Ikstens, 2008; van Biezen, 2004). Party membership in Estonia has been one of the highest in CEE, however the correspondingly low numbers for Latvia and Lithuania reduce the average membership scores for the Baltic region as a whole and makes it quite comparable with other post-communist countries (Biezen, Mair, & Poguntke, 2009; Mair & van Biezen, 2001).

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Latvia introduced the public financing for parties quite recently (in 2012). Before it was the only county in CEE, where the state funding of political parties was absent.
Consequently while exploring the formal and more widely used system level indicators, there seems to be no empirical evidence supporting the argument on the Baltic exceptionality.

1.3. Sociological-historical approach – tracking for the Baltic exceptionalism

The sociological-historical approach focuses on the social bases of the party support and makes the social cleavages, societal divisions and their implications a central theme in the party system studies (Ware, 1996).

The question on cleavages in CEE has puzzled many scholars (Berglund, Hellén, & Aarebrot, 1998; Evans & Whitefield, 2000; Kitschelt, 1995; Lawson, Römmele, & Karasimeonov, 1999; Sitter, 2002; Tóka, 1998). The broad scholarly consensus is that social cleavages are not rooted in post-communist societies to the same extent as in the West and, therefore, cleavage-based party politics is not as pronounced in CEE. Furthermore, the class cleavage, the central cleavage in Western European politics, is not so accentuated in post-communist settings and instead rather value- and identity based cleavages have gained importance. Thus, most of the scholars doubt that the classical Lipset and Rokkan (1967) theory on cleavages is fully applicable to CEE countries.

However, there is no reason to presume that no cleavages and divides had come to play in party system formation in CEE. There have been several efforts to propose an alternative theory or typology of cleavages in CEE, but probably the most widely acknowledged contribution came from Kitschelt (1999) and his colleagues.

Kitschelt identified six major divides for post-communist societies: (1) political regime divide (supporters of regime change vs. retainers of the old communist regime); (2) economic-distributive divide (economic losers of the transition vs. winners of transition and supporters of market reforms); (3) socio-cultural divide (supporters of libertarian ideas in politics, society and economy vs. supporters of authoritarian and protectionist ideas), (5) national-cosmopolitan divide (self-centred nationalism vs. cosmopolitan outlook), (6) ethnic divide.

If we update Kitschelt’s typology (mostly on labels) and supplement it with the classical Lipset-Rokkan theory, we end up with a typology of cleavages which will be used for the current paper: (1) communist-anti-communist cleavage (value-based cleavages manifested through the assessment on communist rule); (2) socio-economic
cleavage, (3) urban vs. rural cleavage, (4) clerical vs. anti-clerical cleavage, (5) centre-periphery cleavage, (6) ethnic cleavage, (7) national vs. cosmopolitan (Westerners) cleavage. (see: Saarts, 2011).

Like in rest of CEE, neither in the Baltic States socio-economic cleavage has gained the central position in the party competition (Jurkynas, 2004; Mikkel, 2006; Pettai, Auers, & Ramonaitè, 2011). What makes Latvia and Estonia more special is not the fact that ethnic cleavage is playing a prominent role in their party politics, but the way, how the ethnic cleavage has been effectively combined with communist-anti-communist divide. Both in the Latvian and Estonian party politics there is an anti-communist, anti-Russian and nationalist camp on the one hand, and rather Russian-friendly and relatively Soviet-nostalgic camp, on the other hand. In other words, ethnic issues are often associated with the Russian-dominance and the communist rule.

Ethnic cleavage is quite salient in several CEE countries (for example in Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania), but nowhere else it has been so explicitly connected with the communist past like in Latvia and Estonia.³

Estonia and Latvia distinguish themselves from the rest of CEE countries even furthermore. The analyses on the cleavage constellations in several post-communist countries have demonstrated, that in most of them, state-church cleavage or clerical-anti-clerical divide plays an important role (Berglund, et al., 1998; McAllister & White, 2007). Even in fairly secular Czech Republic there is a Christian Democratic Party, keeping moral and religious issues at the political agenda (Deegan-Krause, 2006; Kopecký, 2007). Most of the CEE countries are either Catholic (Lithuania, Slovenia and four the Visegrad countries) or Orthodox (Romania and Bulgaria). Therefore it comes not to be a big surprise, that state-church cleavage has gained prominence in the region. However, two Baltic countries are only predominately Protestant countries in the whole CEE and as a result, it sounds logical that moral-religious issues are occupying rather a marginal position in their party politics.

According to World Value survey Estonia is considered to be one of the most secular country in Europe ("World Value Survey," 2010). Consequently, the parties propagating religious-moral issues have never become successful and won seats in the

³ For instance, both in Slovakia and Romania the ethnic cleavage has been also associated with the foreign dominance (supremacy of the Hungarians), but it has much longer historical roots and it has never been exclusively connected with the communist rule.
Estonian parliament (Mikkel, 2006). The Latvians are moderately more religious, but even in Latvia there are no significant political forces, which could be classified as Christian Democrats or parties with a strong religious agenda. Perhaps the Latvia’s First Party (2002 – 2007, now merged with Latvian Way) was the only party attempting to make an appeal to religious voters. But it was rather a populist flash party, not an established programmatic party.

Hence, both Estonia and Latvia stand out from the CEE mainstream at two important points: (1) the most prominent cleavage in their party politics is an ethnic cleavage effectively inter-linked with communist-anti-communist and thus constituting an unique cleavage combination for CEE; (2) church-state cleavage, which is relatively salient in majority of CEE countries, is utterly marginal both in the Latvian and especially in the Estonian party politics.

What about Lithuania? Does Lithuania follow the Latvian and Estonian path, or it proves to be rather different? The dominant cleavage in Lithuania has been communist-anti-communist cleavage (Jurkynas, 2004; Krupavičius, 2005a; Ramonaite, 2006). But in contrast to Latvia and Estonia, one could not associate it with ethnic cleavage or with strong anti-Russian sentiments. The reason for that is, that ethnic cleavage has been rather a second-rank divide in the Lithuanian party politics (share of Russian minority is quite low in Lithuania in comparison with Latvia and Estonia – 8% in Lithuania, 38% in Latvia and 31% in Estonia). Communist-anti-communist divide in Lithuania has been rather constituted as an intra-elite conflict between the communist-successor party (Social Democrats) and nationalistic-conservative forces (Home-Land Union and other conservative right-wing parties). Fairly similar conflict has been visible in Hungary (Fidesz vs. Socialist Party) and to some extent in Poland, where communist-anticommunist cleavage has been mixed with clerical-anti-clerical divide. The latter has been also the case for Lithuania, where anti-communist camp has been usually more conservative and church-inclined, while the communist successor party has often expressed its anti-clericalism.

Hence, in opposite to Latvia and Estonia, church-state cleavage is quite accentuated in the Lithuanian politics, which brings it closer to the Visegrad countries. Particularly to Hungary and Poland, which cleavage constellations are relatively similar to Lithuania: the right-wing, anti-communist, clerical and nationalist camp is opposing
to the left-wing, anti-clerical, rather cosmopolitan and moderately communist-nostalgic camp.

The sociological perspective is not only concentrated on the mapping of cleavages, but attempts to track for their implications while considering the evolution and major features of the party systems. For instance, in the countries, where urban-rural cleavage is central, agrarian parties would assume the leading position, while strong socio-economic cleavage (class cleavage) would contribute to the success of social-democratic parties, etc.

Hence, looking at implications of particular cleavage constellations in the Baltic party politics, we are expected to examine which kind of parties are dominant in their party systems and what it would reveal about the general patterns of party competition.

In the post-communist settings it is reasonable not only to take a look at the classical ideological party families (liberals, social-democrats, conservatives, etc.) (Beyme, 1985), but also to examine the historical roots of the parties, associated with the process of democratic transition in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

According to Kostelecky (2002) five types of parties could be grouped by their historical roots: (1) communist successor parties, (2) former satellite parties (existed legally during the communist period, though they were absolutely marginal), (3) historical pre-communist parties (banned by communists, but re-established after the fall of the regime), (4) parties that have their roots in dissident movements, (5) new parties (completely new parties).

The rise of certain type of parties, listed above, could be associated with the cleavage constellations as well: for example, the strong position of successor parties might reinforce the communist-anti-communist cleavage and vice versa; if the revitalized historical parties happen to be the agrarian parties, like it has been often a case in CEE (Hloušek & Kopeček, 2010), than one can predict the prominence of urban-rural cleavage, etc.

The most striking difference, what catches the eye, is the absence of communist successor parties or their utterly marginal position in the Latvian and Estonian party politics. It is indeed very unique for rest of CEE, because in almost every post-communist country communist parties managed to survive and in majority of counties
they have achieved a central position in the party politics (e.g. Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Lithuania) (Bozóki & Ishiyama, 2002; Grzymala-Busse, 2002).

The Estonian Socialist Labour Party (later called the Leftist Party) managed to get representation in the parliament only with 2% of seats in 1999 and it was the last time they got any representation in the legislature (Toomla, 2005). The Latvian Socialist Party has been more powerful, but not very influential either (Runcis, 2005). Since the 1993 elections, it has been a part of several wider Russian coalitions (For Human Rights in United Latvia, Harmony Centre, etc.), but even in those electoral unions it has not played a very outstanding role. In 1995, the Socialist Party was running for elections on its own and managed to get only 5% of votes.

In fact, it is problematic to treat both Estonian and Latvian communist-successor parties as classical successor-parties like in other CEE countries, because they are now clearly ethnic parties (Estonian Leftist Party merged with several ethnic Russian parties in 2008, and Latvian Socialist Party has been the party of Russian-speakers since its beginning). It is an additional nuance, which puts Latvia and Estonia apart from the CEE mainstream. In rest of CEE countries, the communist successor parties are either social democrats or nationalists/populist, but they never appeal to voters among the ethnic minority groups exclusively (Bozóki & Ishiyama, 2002).

At the point Lithuania is again divergent from its Baltic neighbors. Today’s Social Democratic Party of Lithuania (also known as the Democratic Labour Party of Lithuania 1990 - 2001), which has its roots in former Communist Party of Lithuania, has been a participial party in the Lithuanian party system since the early 1990s. It has won several elections (1992, 2000), has been a governmental party for many times and has been the major counterbalance for the right-wing conservative Homeland Union – another dominant party (Krupavičius, 2005a; Novagrockien 2001). It makes Lithuania again more comparable with the Visegrad countries (e.g. Hungary, Poland, Slovakia) and rest of CEE.

The virtual absence or marginality of communist successor parties in Estonia and Latvia, leads us to another peculiar feature, which distinguishes these countries from the common patterns of CEE. In most of CEE countries there is usually at least one relatively well-established left wing party, typically a social democratic party or socialist party, which have won elections and formed a government at least on one
occasion\(^4\). Curiously, that kind of relatively powerful left-wing party is almost absent in the Latvian and Estonian party politics.

In both countries social democratic parties are fairly weak and consequently the whole party system is strongly rightist-inclined (Krupavičius, 2005b; Mikkel, 2006; Pabriks & Stokenberga, 2006). In other words, dominated by the national-conservative or market-liberal parties. In Latvia, Russian minority parties (e.g. Harmony Center, usually wins 20-25% of votes) have occupied the niche otherwise reserved for social democrats, while the Estonian Social Democratic Party usually obtains only 10% - 15% of votes. The major left-wing party in Estonia, the Center Party, identifies itself as a social-liberal party. In fact, most of scholars classify it as a populist center party with the strong connotations of ethnic party (majority of the supporters are the Russian-speakers) (Mikkel, 2006; Pettai, et al., 2011).

None of the above-mentioned left-wing parties, both in Latvia and Estonia, have never won elections (except the Estonian Center Party), formed a government and occupied the position of prime minister. The Social Democrats and the Center Party in Estonia have been members of government for several times\(^5\), but the governmental coalitions were always lead by the right-wing parties. The situation has been even more problematic for the Latvian left-wing: the ethnic cleavage, which is cross-cutting the normal right-left divide, has generated a peculiar situation, in which all ethnic Latvian parties are expected to be on the right wing, while opposing ethnic Russian parties have seized the free niches on the left. Any ethnic Russian party has never been in government in Latvia.

The Lithuanian party politics proves to be different again. As it was noted earlier, there are relatively mighty social democrats, which have ruled the country for a long time (1992 – 1996, 2001 – 2008).

The previous analysis on the cleavages and their implications has exposed several aspects, which make the Latvian and Estonian party politics relatively distinguished in the wider CEE context. The idiosyncratic and rather exceptional cleavage constellations, in which ethnic cleavage is attached with communist-anti-communist cleavage, have lead to the party system in which there are no viable communist-

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successor parties and consequently the left-wing parties (social democrats) are also relatively weak and the whole party competition ideologically unbalanced and the rightist-inclined. The left-wing ideologies are often associated not only with the communist past, but also with the Russians and the Russian dominance (in particular in Latvia).

All the moments analyzed in the previous section make us to reconsider the question on the Baltic exceptionalism. It appeared, that the sociological approach was able to provide some quite compelling empirical evidences supporting the thesis.

The major differences between Latvia and Estonia on one hand and the rest of CEE countries on the other hand are mapped at table 3.

**Table 3. The Baltic exceptionalism – the major differences from the CEE mainstream.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnical cleavage and church-state cleavage</th>
<th>Historical roots of the parties</th>
<th>Ideological party families</th>
<th>Ideological balance between the parties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic cleavage fused with communist-anti-communist cleavage. Marginal church-state cleavage</td>
<td>No viable communist-successor parties</td>
<td>Rather weak social democratic parties and left-wing parties</td>
<td>The party systems strongly dominated by the right-wing parties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Various patterns, but no linkage between ethnic and communist-anti-communist cleavages. Prominent church-state cleavage</td>
<td>Strong or medium strong communist-successor parties in every country.</td>
<td>Social democrats or socialist parties as the major parties in the party system</td>
<td>Relatively balanced competition between the right wing and the left-wing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communist-anti-communist cleavage, church-state cleavage, but marginal ethnic cleavage.</td>
<td>A strong communist successor party</td>
<td>Social democrats as a major party in the party system</td>
<td>Balanced competition between the right wing and the left-wing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: the author.

While the major peculiarities for two Baltic countries are charted, we are attempting to provide some explanation of them.
1.4. Providing an explanation for the Baltic exceptionalism – Kitschelt’s theory

As it was noted earlier, probably the most acknowledged contribution on the studies of cleavages at the post-communist settings has been made by H. Kitschelt and his colleagues (Kitschelt, Mansfeldová, Markowski, & Tóka, 1999). Besides proposing a new typology for cleavages in CEE, they were also seeking to explain their historical formation, while referring back to a variety of communist legacies in CEE.

Kitschelt came out with three-fold typology of communist regime legacies in which he distinguishes between: patrimonial, national-accommodative and bureaucratic-authoritarian communism.

**Patrimonial communism.** In the case the communist rule was installed in predominately agrarian countries (employment in agriculture higher than 60%) with a low level of industrialization and urbanization. There was no viable urban middle class mobilization at the inter-war period needed for the democratic drive. So the authoritarian regime was relatively well-established even before the communist rule. That is the reason why the countries with patrimonial communist had virtually no experience with democracy before 1989. The power relations at the communist period and even earlier were rather basing on personal domination and were buttressed by clientilistic ties. Due to low level of professionalization of bureaucracy, the corruption and patronage was almost omnipresent in the political and administrative system. While promoting the rapid industrialization and modernization, the communist elites were able to gain substantial legitimacy and therefore they had enough power resources and symbolic capital in order to survive the transition. They reacted to the Velvet Revolutions with pre-emptive reforms, which allowed them to retain their power position even under the new democratic regime. According to Kitschelt, classical examples of patrimonial communism were Romania and Bulgaria.

In the case of patrimonial communism rather ethnic divisions turned out to be the main mobilizing factor, because these countries had never experienced a powerful socio-economic mobilization according to models of modern class politics.

**National-accommodative communism** prevailed in fairly modernized countries, which were already moderately urbanized and industrialized (employment in agriculture 40%-60%). At the interwar period urban middle-class was quite numerous and politically well-mobilized, while urban working class remained rather unorganized and passive. Since the countries retained largely their agrarian nature, there
was a widespread agrarian mobilization and urban-rural was the most salient cleavage in the party politics. National-accommodative communism emerged in the countries with semi-authoritarian or semi-democratic regimes, which makes it distinct from patrimonial communism with highly authoritarian personalistic leadership. While the countries with the national-accommodative communism were already relatively modernized before the communists came to power, the communist elite had never an opportunity to assert their legitimacy in modernizing the country in the full scale. Rather they faced to widespread resistance and ought to make compromises with several dissatisfied elite groups. While making reasonable concessions, they were able to gain at least some support among wider population. In the beginning of transition the communist elites were already weakened, but had strong organizational recourses in their disposal and they enjoyed a moderate public support. It allowed them to initiate the protracted negotiations with the dissidents. After the negotiated regime change the former communists embraced the new democratic order, changed their imago and electoral appeal, founded a new party (communist successor party) and started to challenge the dissident parties.

In countries with the national-accommodative communism rather socio-cultural divide (conflict between religious-national-authoritarian camp on the one hand and secular-cosmopolitan-libertarian camp on the other hand) and communist-anti-communist cleavage became essential. Hungary and Slovenia and to some extent Poland were the principal examples of the regime type described.

**Bureaucratic-authoritarian communism** was characteristic for the industrialized and modernized countries (less than 40% of employed in the agriculture sector) with considerable democratic experience in the inter-war years. Both urban bourgeoisie and proletariat was politically mobilized and clustered around political parties. The communist party, which seized the power, ultimately became as a highly bureaucratic, hierarchical and disciplined political force, which followed the orthodox Marxist-Leninist ideology. It built its legitimacy on a large section of working class, effectively indoctrinated by communist ideology. Communist regime itself was repressive and did not tolerate any opposition - any reform movements inside the party and in society were mercilessly eradicated. Because their narrow base of social support (only working class was willing to be faithful) the regime was quite easily overturned by the short sharp protest wave in 1989. “The implosion of the old order”, was what did happened in Kitschelt’s terms. Due to their feeble legitimacy, the old
The communist party was not able to transform itself to a “normal” democratic left-wing party, as it was the case for national-accommodative communism.

Taking into account the high level of socio-economic development, it was almost inevitable, that socio-economic cleavage became dominant in the countries with bureaucratic-authoritarian communism. East-Germany and Czech Republic were the only cases identified accordingly.

While elaborating his theory, Kitschelt was not paying much attention to the Baltic States. He was predominately focused on the Visegrad countries and on the Balkan (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria). Nevertheless he puts forward and argument that all three Baltic countries could be classified as mixed types, encompassing both the features patrimonial and national-accommodative communism (see table 4).

Table 4. Communist regime legacies and the Baltic States, according to Kitschelt (1999).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bureaucratic-authoritarian</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
<th>National-accommodative</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
<th>Patrimonial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>Romania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Germany</td>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Croatia</td>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>Albania</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>Serbia</td>
<td>Ukraine, Russia and republics of former USSR (except the Baltic States)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Kitschelt, et al. 1998: 39

1.5. Providing an explanation for the Baltic exceptionalism – Kitschelt’s theory revised.

Although Kitschelt’s theory seems to be very elegant and highly elaborated, one can really doubt its validity in the context of the Baltic States. There could be several problems pointed out.
First, both Latvia and Estonia experienced parliamentary democratic regime for a relatively long period in the inter-war period (1918-1934). Of course, both countries’ democratic experience was not comparable with Czechoslovakia, however it was much longer than in CEE in general (Kasekamp, 2010). Lithuania was different – the authoritarian regime was already installed in 1926. It raises doubts, especially for the Estonian and Latvian cases, whether these countries could be really associated with patrimonial communism. With the countries lacking any democratic experience prior to the communist rule?! Or whether Latvia and Estonia could be classified as national-accommodative regimes, which countries democratic experience was considerably more short-lived (e.g. Hungary, Poland, Slovenia).

Second, we have to consider the level of socio-economic development. Latvia and Estonia were not economically so advanced and industrialized as Czechoslovakia in the end of the 1930’s. However, the employment in agriculture was around 60%, which was just slightly higher than in Hungary (51%), but lower than in Poland (65% - a country classified by Kitschelt as a mixed type, encompassing some features of bureaucratic-authoritarian communism!?) (Janos, 2000; Kahk & Tarvel, 1997). At the interwar period both Baltic countries’ GDP was comparable with Hungary and they were economically more advanced than Poland, Romania and Bulgaria, which remained more backward agricultural economies (Köll & Valge, 1998; Valge, 2003). At the same time the inter-war Lithuania was much closer to the archetypical examples of patrimonial communism, because by its GDP and structure of employment it was rather comparable with the Balkan countries. So the evidences presented, put under the question the argument that Latvia and Estonia resembled with patrimonial communism regimes. Rather national-accommodative communism was more evident. However, concerning the Lithuanian case, Kitschelt’s argument seemed to be more valid.

Third, contrary to the Balkan countries, the administrative culture of the Baltic States was strongly influenced by the German administrative traditions and easily met the criteria for Weberian technocratic bureaucratic rationalism (Norkus, 2012). It was particularly true for Latvia and Estonia, where the Baltic German heritage and Protestantism made these countries more similar to the Nordic countries than to the Balkan (see Kasekamp, 2010). Although clientelist ties and corruption permeated the communist party machinery at the Soviet times, their level and intensity was never comparable with the Caucasian and Central Asian republics. Hence, the Baltic
countries, and particularly Estonia and Latvia, could be rather associated with bureaucratic-authoritarian communism or at least with national-accommodative regime type.

And finally, patrimonial communism presumes the pre-emptive reforms introduced by the incumbent communist elites in the beginning of transition, while national-accommodative communism usually leads to the negotiated transition between the old communist elite and dissidents. Neither of these scenarios did happen in Latvia and Estonia. The transition could be described as an implosion of the old regime: the old communist elite lost its legitimacy very rapidly in 1988 – 1989 and any attempts to rehabilitate the old communist party in the newly emerged democratic system failed (Smith, Pabriks, Purs, & Lane, 2002). So the transition in Latvia and Estonia resembled more to the countries with bureaucratic-authoritarian communism. Here again the Lithuania transition was divergent. It experienced rather a negotiated transition similar to Poland and Hungary: on the one side there was a powerful dissident movement (*Sajudis*) and on the other side the Communist Party of Lithuania, which was more moderate, but clearly pro-independence (Nørgaard, 1999). Communists were legitimate enough not to get wiped out and managed to transform their party into successful communist successor party, as it was a common for national-accommodative regimes.

Another problem was that Kitschelt provided very few evidences on the Baltic cases and while analyzing them, he was relying only on one source – Misiunas’ and Taagepera’s (1993) book on the modern history of the Baltic States.

The weaknesses of Kitschelt’s arguments were also pointed out by Lithuanian political scientist Z. Norkus (2012). Norkus also argues, that Latvia and Estonia were belonging to the same family with the bureaucratic-authoritarian communist regimes, while Lithuania was indeed a mix of patrimonial and national-accommodative communism.

According to Norkus the communist regime in Lithuanian was principally national-accommodative, however it did assume some features of patrimonial communism: the level of socio-economic development of the country was rather poor prior to the communist rule, the apparatus of the Communist Party was quite penetrated by the clientelist networks and often the personalistic style of leadership was exercised. Due to economic backwardness of the country, the Lithuanian communists had an opportunity to further modernize the country (the major surge in urbanization and
industrialization did happen at the communist time) and while doing so, they were able gain some extra legitimacy. It was the option denied for the Latvian and Estonian communist elites, because these countries were already sufficiently modernized and the communist rule was considered to be rather a national disaster promoting de-modernization.

The author of the paper is only partly agreed with the Norkus point on Latvia and Estonia, because it seems to be a too bold move to put these countries together with Czech Republic and East Germany. Of course, accordingly to their mode of transition (regime implosion), bureaucratic and administrative culture (Weberian, German-style bureaucracy) and the interwar democratic experience, Latvia and Estonia could be classified as bureaucratic-authoritarian communist regimes. But on the other hand their level of socio-economic development in the inter-war years, was not sufficient to meet the criteria for bureaucratic-authoritarian communism (approximately 60% in agriculture, but less than 40% was required in order to qualify). As a result Latvia and Estonia could be classified as mixed regimes, embracing predominately the bureaucratic-authoritarian communism, but comprising some features of national-accommodative regime either.

However, if we classify Estonia and Latvia accordingly, a problem will emerge. How to associate the given countries with national-accommodative communism, if there was no negotiated transition, no survival of powerful communist successor parties and any kind of legitimate “national communism”? Shortly, the label of “national communism” just doesn’t fit at all. It reveals the deficiencies in Kitschelt’s framework and makes us to seek for new appropriate concepts.

The crucial question at the point is: why did the communist successor parties fail to be successful in Latvia/Estonia and instead of negotiated transition there was a regime implosion? The reason behind that was not only the communist elites’ inability to gain any additional legitimacy by further modernizing the country, but we have to look at the national composition of the Latvian and Estonian communist parties. Here an astonishing fact would be revealed: in the 1980’s the ethnic Latvians made only 43% of members of Latvian Communist Party, while in Estonia the corresponding number was barely above 50% (52% in fact) (Misiunas & Taagepera, 1993). It was not a unique situation for some other former USSR republics (e.g. Ukraine, Belarus), but in CEE it was exceptional. The share of the ethnic Lithuanians in the Communist
Party of Lithuania was 69%. In the Visegrad and in the Balkans the local communist parties were predominately staffed by the titular nations.

The intensive immigration of the Russian speakers even exacerbated the situation for the ethnic Latvians and Estonians, because in the end of the 1980’s the Latvians made only 52% of population of Latvia, while in Estonia the corresponding number was 68% (Ruutsoo, 1998).

Hence, we are talking about a variety of communist rule in which the party apparatus and administration was rather dominated by the foreign nationalities (in the Baltic case – by the Russian speakers). That’s the reason why it seems to be justified to propose a new specific regime type into the classification of communist legacies. Let’s call it as foreign-hegemonic communism.

Foreign-hegemonic communism is a special the Baltic variety of communist rule, which comprises the majority of the features also characterizing bureaucratic-authoritarian communism, but it has developed in the countries, which were only moderately modernized and industrialized prior to the communist rule (not yet so modernized like Czech Republic and Germany).

The new theoretical contribution into the typology of communist legacies (now taking into account the particularity of the Baltic States) is presented at table 5.

Table 5. Communist regime legacies – the revised typology.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bureaucratic-authoritarian</th>
<th>Mixed: foreign-hegemonic</th>
<th>National-accommodative</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
<th>Patrimonial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>Slovakia</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Germany</td>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(Poland), etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Russia, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Kitschelt et al. 1998, the author.

1.6. Cleavage formation under foreign-hegemonic communist legacy

As it was noted earlier the communist elite was not able to attain much legitimacy under the foreign-hegemonic communism: first, because its inability to carry out the further modernization project and second, because it has been largely dominated by the foreign nationalities. When transition began the former communist elites had few options left: either to get wiped out or to join with the dissident movements. Because
the wider population associated the communist party with illegitimate foreign (the Russian) domination and most of the party members were indeed the hard-liners with anti-independence and anti-democratic attitudes, it was almost impossible to convert the party to the successful left-wing communist successor party. Ultimately the only reasonable strategy available was to constitute the party as an ethnic minority party for the Russian-speakers.

The worsening demographic situation (in which there was a real threat for the titular nations to become a minority in their own country) pushed the ethnic cleavage into the center of political struggle. The persistent associations between the communist rule on the one hand and the foreign ethnic domination on the other hand, enabled to emerge a linkage between ethnic cleavage and communist-anti-communist cleavage, producing a major divide for the Baltic party politics.

Since communism could be easily associated with socialism and even with social democracy, it did allow the right wing nationalists to exploit that mental connection and to demonstrate that all left-wing ideologies could be associated with foreign domination and communism and therefore they would be against the national interests (anti-Estonian and anti-Latvian and pro-Russian in the Baltic context). It was relatively common in CEE in the 1990s, that communist ideology was linked with other left-wing ideologies and stigmatized in the way, but it appears to be the specialty for Estonia and Latvia, that it was also so strongly attached with the ethnic issues.

The association described was an additional factor, what made the rise of strong left-wing parties quite difficult in the settings of foreign-hegemonic communist legacy. However, the major factor contributing to the weakness of the left-wing parties was the failure and marginalization of the communist-successor parties. Social democrats and socialists in Latvia and Estonia lacked the organizational structures and the basic legitimacy – all that what was accessible for the left-wing parties in CEE, as most of them were the communist successor parties.

The linkage between the Russians and the left-wing ideologies has been particularly pronounced in Latvia, where it has inhibited the rise of an ideologically balanced party competition. In Estonia the situation has been less problematic, because the Estonian Social Democrats have never been associated with the pro-Russian attitudes and Soviet-nostalgia. However, as it was noted earlier, the party itself has been
organizationally quite weak and their electoral success has never been very remarkable (except in recent elections 2011).

Nevertheless, the Estonian Center Party has been constantly accused to be Russian-friendly and favorable towards the communist past. Nowadays many Estonian voters are even considering the Center Party to be rather as a Russian minority party. Thus the party is playing an important role in the Estonian party system, in keeping the dominant ethnic/communist-anti-communist cleavage still alive.

The cleavage formation under the foreign-hegemonic communist legacy is shown at the graph 1.

**Graph 1. Cleavage formation and its implications under foreign-hegemonic communist legacy.**

The curious moment related to foreign-hegemonic communist legacy is the question on socio-economic cleavage or the class cleavage. Due to fact that countries with foreign-hegemonic communist legacy have been relatively modernized and economically advanced (at least in the CEE context) one could presume the rise of socio-economic cleavage. Many authors have noted, that beside the ethnic cleavage (and communist-anti-communist cleavage) the socio-economic cleavage has played a significant role in the Latvian and Estonian party politics, indeed (Lagerspetz & Vogt, 2004; Mikkel, 2006; Pabriks & Stokenberga, 2006). However it has been constantly overshadowed by the ethnic cleavage. One can speculate that without the Russian-minority issues and a special foreign-hegemonic communist heritage, Latvia and
Estonia would have followed the path of Czech Republic, where socio-economic cleavage has become dominant.

1.7. Why there is no prominent state-church cleavage in Estonia and Latvia?

One remaining puzzle needs for explanation: why the state-church cleavage and religious-moral issues have been rather unimportant in the Estonian and Latvian party politics?

As it was mentioned earlier, both countries are the only Protestant countries in CEE. It makes the difference, because many scholars pointed out, that state-church cleavage has been usually less pronounced in the Protestant countries than in the Catholic ones (Gallagher, Laver, & Mair, 2005; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967).

Both Latvia and Estonia were Christianized quite lately (13th century) and the local peasantry was relatively ignorant towards Christianity until the 18th – 19th century (Kasekamp, 2010). The Latvian and Estonian peasants regarded the Protestant (Lutheran) church as a church of the Baltic German nobility (Herrenkirche) not as a church of their own (Volkskirche). As a result the church and religion played neither an important role in the national awakening movement nor became a significant component in the nation-building project. Although the state-church cleavage was moderately accentuated in the party politics at the interwar period, further secularization at the Soviet time made it less and less relevant. So it was difficult to re-vitalize the cleavage after 1991 and to make it as a salient divide for the contemporary democratic party politics.

Discussion – is there really the Baltic exceptionalism?

We have pointed out several crucial differences for Latvia and Estonia in which they seem to stand out from the CEE mainstream. The key question at the point is, whether these discrepancies were sufficient enough in order to talk about the Baltic exceptionalism?

There is no clear answer for that question. It depends very much on the perspective we take. As it was pointed out earlier, if we examine the formal and commonly employed system level indicators, like stability and fragmentation, there is no reason to argue for the Baltic exceptionalism. That is the reason why most of the scholars
making research on the party politics of CEE, take no notice of the peculiarities of the Baltic countries.

Nevertheless, while the sociological-historical analysis is employed, it turns out that the Baltic countries (Latvia and Estonia, but not Lithuania) diverge from the CEE mainstream on many significant aspects.

Of course one can argue, that exceptionalism is not only confined with the two Baltic countries and some exceptional features could be also found in the party politics of some other CEE countries. It’s true. Like it was noticed in the previous sections of the paper, exceptionalism is never an absolute and strictly defined category. It is always relative, interpretative and thus opened up for a critical consideration. However, some crucial aspects which make the Latvian and Estonian party politics very distinct from the common patterns of CEE, leads us to consider the idea of the Baltic exceptionalism.

The paper also demonstrated some merits of the sociological-historical analysis in the CEE context. First, the sociological-historical analysis enables us to go beyond the mere quantitative indicators and offers a deeper insight into the constitutive foundations of the party systems in CEE. Second, the sociological-historical approach appears to provide a good ground for the further theory building and concept formation. The advantages of that were also demonstrated at the present analysis, where some new conceptual and theoretical innovations were made.

**Conclusion**

The paper has been focused on the phenomenon of exceptionalism in the party system analysis in CEE. It put forward an argument that two Baltic countries, Latvia and Estonia (but not Lithuania) seem to stand out from the CEE mainstream if the sociological-historical analytical perspective for the party system analysis would be employed. The major divergences from the common patterns of CEE were related with the idiosyncratic cleavage constellations in which the ethnic cleavage was linked with communist-anti-communist cleavage, constituting rather a unique combination for CEE countries. The peculiar cleavage formation entailed many implications for the Latvian and Estonian party systems, which differentiated them form the common patterns of CEE furthermore: (1) the marginalized position or virtual absence of communist successor-parties, (2) weakness of the left-wing parties (social democrats
and socialists) and ideologically un-balanced party competition, in which the right-wing parties have assumed a very dominant position. Additionally, in contrast to majority of CEE countries, state-church cleavage and religious-moral issues were playing an utterly peripheral role in the Latvian and Estonian party politics.

While the virtual absence of state-church cleavage could be explained by the Protestant heritage, the marginal position of the communist-successor parties and the weakness of the left-wing parties needed for more elaborated explanation. The theoretical contribution of H. Kitschelt on the cleavage formation and communist legacies, provided some valuable indications. However, the Kitschelt’s theory proved to be deficient in order to explain the specific context of the Baltic States, and therefore the new concepts were developed. Latvia and Estonia were classified as countries with foreign-hegemonic communist regime legacy. Foreign-hegemonic communism encompassed most of the characteristics of bureaucratic-authoritarian communism, but its special component was a strong foreign ethnic dominance (dominance of the Russian –speakers) in the communist party and state structures. That is the reason why the association between the communist rule and ethnic issues was born and ethnic cleavage was smoothly interlinked with communist-anti-communist cleavage. The further implications of the regime type where, that the communist party associated with the Russians lacked any legitimacy in order to transform itself to the normal left-wing successor party and consequently the whole left wing lacked organizational and symbolic recourses usually available for the communist successor parties in most of CEE countries. Furthermore, the left-wing ideologies were not only associated with communism, but also with the pro-Russian attitudes, which made it difficult for the social-democratic parties to rise to prominence in the Baltic party systems.

Regardless of many distinct features pointed out for Latvia and Estonia, the question on the Baltic exceptionalism remained somewhat open ended, because the exceptionalism is rather a contextual and indicative category, always opened up for further critical consideration.
References


