Why are the post-communist party systems not stabilizing?

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Abstract  
The party system development in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin wall has put focus on the question what it takes for party systems in newly established democracies to stabilize. Some scholars have argued that party system stabilization will follow more or less automatically as time elapse and democracy consolidates, whereas others have pointed to a number of factors which sustain the level of instability. In this paper we analyze party system stability in the ten post-communist EU-member states between 1990 and 2012. The study is based on data from the 68 parliamentary elections held since the first multiparty elections in 1990. We use three indicators to capture the extent of party system stability: electoral volatility, support for new and splinter parties and the number of parties entering and exiting parliament. The first aim of the paper is to compare the level of party system stability temporally as well as between the countries. The results show that the level of instability is consistently high in the region in almost all countries and that there are few indications of stabilization. Estonia and Poland are the only exceptions to this trend. The second aim is to explain why stabilization does not seem to occur in the region. We argue that the main reason is because of what we call a logic of (asymmetric) path dependency, which implies that previous instability breeds continued instability. Both economic performance and level of corruption becomes insignificant when controlling for the level of electoral volatility in the previous as well as the mean level of volatility in the two previous elections. If these results hold in further tests, we can expect party system instability to prevail in most of the CEE countries for the foreseeable future, regardless of the governments’ performances.

Introduction

In the spring of 2001, the former King of Bulgaria Simeon Saksoburggotski returned from his exile in Spain and immediately founded a new political party, which two months later won the Bulgarian parliamentary elections with nearly 43 percent of the votes and half of the seats in parliament. While doubtless an extraordinary event in the history of party politics, it is, however, nothing but the most striking example of party system turbulence in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe. In the following years, new parties won the elections in Latvia (2002), Estonia (2003), Lithuania (2004), again in Bulgaria (2009) and in Slovenia (2011), and made important inroads in several other countries. What would be an extremely rare phenomenon in the rest of Europe, older and newer democracies alike, is thus a fairly common feature in the post-communist region, where every election on average sees the entrance of a genuinely new or a splinter party in parliament and where the average level of electoral volatility is 27 per cent, which is a considerably higher level than in any West European country since the introduction of universal suffrage for both men and women.

The fate of the post-communist party systems has been frequently discussed by the scholars in the field, some of which have argued that these countries are different and thus will have greater difficulties to stabilise compared to the countries in previous waves of democratization (Mair, 1997; Bielasiak, 2005; Mainwaring and Zoco 2007), and others who have argued that stabilisation will occur eventually in the post-communist region as well (Toole, 2000; Tavits, 2005; Lewis, 2006).

In this paper we analyse the party system development between 1990 and 2012 in ten post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe.¹ We define stability in terms of electoral volatility and party persistence and identify cross country and cross temporal patterns of stability and instability. Our first main finding is very much in line with other recent studies, namely that on an aggregated level, there is no evidence of a stabilising trend (see for example Epperly, 2011), and moreover that in a majority of the countries, the party systems have remained highly unstable or become even more unstable. There are however considerable variation over time and between countries. This variation has been neglected in much of the previous research but is crucial for understanding the causal mechanisms behind the persistent

¹ The countries included in the study are the ten EU-member states from Central and Eastern Europe: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia, which in total have held 68 parliamentary elections between 1990 and the end of 2012.
party system instability. We argue that instability could be explained by a path-dependent feedback mechanism, which makes party system persistently turbulent, even after the original causes for instability may have disappeared. We find statistical support for this hypothesis, as previous levels of electoral volatility is the only factor that remains significant in the multivariate regression analysis, including both economic performance indicators as well as levels of corruption. If these results hold in further tests, we can expect party system instability to prevail in most countries for the foreseeable future, regardless of the governments’ performances.

This paper is organized in five sections. In the next section we discuss the previous research on party system development in the post-communist region. Thereafter we discuss our methodological considerations on how to measure stability. The fourth section presents our empirical findings and the fifth section concludes with a discussion of the implications of our findings pointing to a path dependent logic of party system stability and instability.

**Previous research**

One of the recurring themes in the literature on post-communist party system development has been the lack of party system stability. Regardless of what comparisons that are made and, almost, regardless of how the concept of stability is defined and measured, the post-communist countries turn out as remarkably unstable (Epperly, 2011; Powell & Tucker, 2012; Rose & Munro, 2009; Mainwaring & Zoco, 2007; Bielasiak, 2002).

But while every researcher in this field seem to agree on the obvious empirical fact of post communist party system instability, there is an ongoing debate regarding the causes of the instability and, related to that, on the prospects of future party system stability in the region. On one end of this debate stand those who argue that the economic hardship after the transition is the main cause of instability and thus that once the economy recovers, political stability will follow (Lane and Ersson 2007; McAllister and White, 2007; Tavits 2005). Several earlier studies have shown that economic growth (Tavits, 2005), low inflation (ibid) and socio-economic development (as measured by the Human Development Index; Lane and Ersson, 2007) have a significant effect on party system stability. According to Tavits (2005: 293), “the existing literature on economic voting […] is very consistent about the claim that short-term economic performance determines electoral behavior both on the individual as well as aggregate level”. Tavits also argues that although electoral volatility in general increases
after a change of regime, as in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989, that is “simply a prologue for the process of stabilization” (Tavits, 2005: 296; cf Lupu and Stokes, 2010). In her 2005 study Tavits identifies a stabilizing trend in the post-communist countries that fits with her empirical conclusion that party systems in general start to become more stable on average eleven years after regime change. Underlying this argument is the assumption that time *per se*, all other things being equal, should have a positive effect on stabilization. With each election, the voters are expected to become more familiar with, and thus grow more attached to, the parties that are initially the most successful parties and correspondingly get the most media attention. The distance between established and unestablished parties increases, making it much more difficult for new contenders to be successful in later elections than in those directly following the transition (McAllister and White, 2007)

While stabilization has been the obvious end-point in the literature on party system development in Western Europe, not everyone are convinced about the eventual emergence of stable party systems in post communist Europe. As Mainwaring and Loco (2007: 171) put it: “the critical determinant of the stabilization of electoral competition is when democracy was born, not how old it is. One of their main findings is that the levels of volatility are significantly higher in countries that became democratic later, regardless of how long democracy has endured in the country; the earlier a country became democratic, the more stable is its party system. The freezing hypothesis of Lipset and Rokkan (1967), while perhaps still relevant in the West European context, could not automatically be transferred to the Central and East European context. Already in 1997, Peter Mair forecasted that the post-communist countries should expect persistent party system instability. Three features have been highlighted by Mair and others in this respect.

First, the combination of weak party organizations and low levels of voter identification in the region are expected to contribute to high volatility levels and a perpetual reshuffling of parties. An important characteristic of the post communist transition is that the political parties were formed during or after the regime change, not before. In earlier waves of democratization, parties emerged at an early stage and became increasingly successful as the voting rights expanded. By the time democracy surfaced, the party system was already more or less stable. Instead, most post-communist parties were formed around 1989 or later and have been, to borrow a phrase from Abby Innes, “instant catch-all parties”, defined by their appeal to “all of the people, all of the time” (Innes, 2002: 90). Parties were created top-down,
during a short time period and relied heavily on a few central personalities. There were few attempts to build membership organizations beyond the minimal structures required for candidate recruitment (van Biezen, 2003), resulting in highly elitist parties, distant from the voters. Related to this is the question whether the low degree of attachment between voters and parties is primarily driven from below, despite the ambitions of parties to build partisan support (Lupu and Stokes, 2010), or from above, by elite-level reshuffling making it almost impossible for voters to stay with the same parties over a long period of time (Tavits, 2008; Rose and Munro, 2003).

Second, the emergence of parties with loose electoral constituencies could also be understood as a logical consequence of the lack of strong cleavage structures in the region (Innes, 2002). As Elster (1998) writes, the post-communist countries have for a long time lacked a differentiated civil society and a corresponding set of organizations. Therefore, these parties are not anchored in social divisions but do instead “float” over society (for a critique of this perspective, see Evans, 2006). In a slightly different take on this, Kopecky (1995) argues that the majority of the electorate in 1990 was not just uncertain about what the new parties stood for, neither did they have clearly discernible established interests among themselves. McAllister and White (2007), on the other hand, find that voters in the post-communist countries demonstrate similar social cleavages as voters in established democracies, but argue that the parties in the region are much less effective in representing those cleavages.

A third crucial factor is the primacy of valence issues, i.e. “issues on which all parties declare the same objective but dispute each other’s competence in achieving the desired policy“ (Kitschelt et al, 1999: 137). Politically, the 1990s were almost completely dominated by two issues: macro-economic liberalization and EU accession. There was a broad consensus among the regions’ political elites both on the aim of transition to a market economy and on the goal of membership in the EU. Because of that, the party system offered only a limited accountability: you could choose a different party but not, in reality, a different policy. Innes (2002: 86) has argued that the type of party competition that emerged in the region is a rational response to the “phenomenal number of policy constraints resulting from the transition from Communism, many of which are externally dictated”. No matter who ruled the country, they all had to go through with more or less the same policy. That made politics not so much a matter of what should be done, but rather it was a question of who could do it best.
In opposition a party could benefit from criticizing the government’s tough policy, but once they came to power they had to pursue more or less the same policies.

While earlier studies have focused the post-communist exceptionality, much less attention has been paid to the variation within the region. Since all the countries have seen both the salience of valence issues and the lack of stable party organizations with low party identification, these factors can hardly account for the variation within the region. The same goes for a number of other factors as well, for example institutional settings, which do not vary, as long as one excludes countries with presidential systems, majoritarian electoral systems and/or a dubious democratic track record (such as Russia, Ukraine and Moldova).

Instead, those who have tried to differentiate among the regions’ party systems have put most emphasis on economic factors (as referred to above), the number of effective parties (Tavits, 2005; Lane and Ersson 2007) or on the societal cleavage structures (Kitschelt, 1999, McAllister and White, 2007). In their attempt to define a “middle approach” between those who argue that stabilization will or will not occur in the post-communist countries, Evans and Whitefield (1993) argued that countries with distinct socio-economic or ethnic cleavages should expect higher levels of stability than countries with blurred or non-existent cleavages. Evans and Whitefield thus predicted high levels of party system instability in Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia, and medium-level stability levels in the rest of the region. Tavits (2005) finds that stable social cleavages have a positive effect on stability, but only in times of economic decline. Ethnic cleavages have no effect, according to Tavits.

The majority of studies in this field measure the aggregate volatility levels, i.e. there is no differentiation whether they are a function of voter shifts among the already established parties or the results of new parties winning seats on behalf of the old ones. But as Powell and Tucker point out, the Pedersen Index is actually measuring two different things.

Sara Birch (2001) was one of the first who addressed this issue, but without doing much more than pointing to the fact that in Central and Eastern Europe a substantial part of the volatility rates derives from new party entries. When separating what she calls replacement, i.e. switches to new party entries from volatility between established parties, she finds a strong correlation between the two of .48 (2001: 10). The ratio in favour of replacement is considerably higher in the former Soviet Union than in Central Europe.
But it is rather Powell & Tucker (2009) that are the first to actually make a clear distinction between the two types of volatility (Type A, which stands for a new party, and Type B between parties) and also test whether there are different factors driving the two. Interestingly enough they not only find different trends of volatility in the two types (a decreasing trend in total volatility, i.e. A+B and in type A, but a steady or slightly increasing one in type B), they also find that the explanatory factors (economic voting, institutional characteristics, cleavages and changes in the size of the electorate) have the complete opposite effects on the two different types, although it should be pointed out that very few correlations are significant. Not surprisingly they find that by far the largest part of the volatility scores for most Post-communist countries are indeed due to the extremely successful new parties that not only made it to the parliament in their first attempt, but also often made it all the way to the government and in extreme cases even obtaining the post of Prime Minister. As with many similar studies they mix democratic and less democratic countries and they also have a strange way of calculating volatility in case parties merge, which exaggerates the impact of type A volatility and may drive the results to some extent.

To conclude, previous studies on this topic suffer from either one of two shortcomings: studies that have focused on the aggregated level have neglected the inter-regional variation within Central and Eastern Europe and studies that have tested hypothesis by comparing the party systems on a country level have included countries that suffer from severe democratic shortage and which in turn differ from the more democratic post-communist countries on several important contextual variables, thus over-estimating the importance of factors (socio-economic, institutional) which may not be relevant for understanding the variation in post-communist Europe. A clamp down on oppositional parties is hardly proof of party system stabilisation in the sense it was meant.

**Concepts and methods**

How to define and measure party system stability has been a contentious issue in this field of research. The fault line runs between those who define it in terms of patterns of party competition and interaction (Mair, 1997: 175) and those who define it in terms of electoral swings and party persistence. Even though we acknowledge the merits of the former approach, we will however stick to the latter, which for various reasons seems to be gaining ground.
In this study, we use three indicators of party system stability: i) electoral volatility, ii) electoral support for new and splinter parties that enter parliament in their first attempt and, iii) the sum of exit and entry parties, i.e. parliamentary parties that fail to be returned to parliament and parties outside parliament that manage to win representation. While partly overlapping, these three indicators nevertheless measure different aspects of party system stability and including all three of them helps us to get a more comprehensive picture.

Electoral volatility

Electoral volatility is perhaps the most commonly used indicator of party system stability. It measures, on an aggregated level, the share of voters that changes parties between two elections, i.e. the Pedersen index. It is derived by adding all changes in terms of the percentage of votes for all parties from one election to the next and then dividing the sum by 2. The index thus runs from 0 to 100, where 0 implies that all parties got exactly the same share of the votes as in the previous election and 100 that none of the parties that won votes in the first election managed to do so in the following one. Needless to say, the higher the score is, the more unstable is the party system. It is important to point out, however, that the index does not say anything about vote shifts at the individual level. If, for example, all voters for Party A switch to Party B and vice versa, the volatility score would still be zero, even though both parties did not keep a single voter and all voters switched parties. That is of course a hypothetical scenario and it has been shown that the aggregated and the individual levels are highly correlated (Bartolini & Mair: 1990: 29).

Since it is almost impossible to gather information on every party competing, we count only parties gaining parliamentary representation separately, while parties failing to enter parliament are lumped together and compared between elections. Apart from being a valid and frequently used indicator of party system stability, electoral volatility also has the advantage of being easily comparable over time and between countries.

Admittedly, electoral volatility also has its limitations in terms of capturing party system stability and change. For example, low volatility does not necessarily mean that nothing has changed in the party system. The parties involved may have modified their ideology and policy while still retaining their electoral base. Evidently, parties may go through extensive
make-overs, just in order to keep their voters, which for example several communist successor parties in Eastern Europe did when adopting nationalist programs. Nor does high volatility necessarily imply an unstable party system, as long as the shifts are either very regular or between parties which are ideologically close (“bloc volatility”). The increasing levels of volatility in Western Europe over the last decades, is a case in point. There might still be stability in terms of ideology, policy and coalition building, and the contents of this may be well known among the electorate, even if they become more inclined to shift parties between elections.

As noted by other scholars, measuring electoral volatility is not always as straightforward as it may seem (see for example Powell and Tucker, 2012). As long as the relevant parties competing remain more or less the same, counting volatility is very easy, which is the case for most elections in Western Europe. Central Europe is quite another matter in that respect. Not only are the entries of new parties much more frequent, there are in addition numerous electoral alliances as well as mergers and splinter groups, sometimes under confusingly similar names, which make the calculations much more difficult. The result is volatility figures that differ considerably from one scholar to the next, while the figures for Western Europe hardly differ at all. It takes in-depth knowledge of the specific parties and party development in the region to be able to make an accurate assessment of the volatility level, but even among those scholars, figures still differ according to how splinters, mergers and new parties are counted.⁵

Sikk (2005: 392-4) has an extensive discussion on the merits of different ways to calculate volatility. We do not fundamentally disagree with him but still chose to calculate it somewhat differently. Like Sikk, we count the volatility score as the electoral result for genuinely new parties, i.e. parties that are not successor to any previous party, participate in their first parliamentary elections and which mainly contain candidates who were not previously part of other parties.⁶ Also in line with Sikk, we calculate the volatility of electoral alliances and new parties resulting from mergers in relation to those parties’ previous results, since the two parties are still in operation and their voters have more or less the same alternative in the next

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⁵ See for example Sikk (2005); Bakke and Sitter (2005); Powell and Tucker, 2009 whose results differ quite significantly.

⁶ The aforementioned NDSV in Bulgaria, is for example counted as 42.7, divided by 2.
election.\textsuperscript{7} We differ with Sikk, however, when it comes to new parties, established by politicians breaking away from their old party. We argue that treating splinters the same way as mergers, as Sikk does, underestimates the change caused by a party split. In our view splinters constitute a more fundamental change of the party scene, than do alliances and mergers, which implies that the instability of a party system is underestimated if calculated according to Sikk. Moreover, voting for a splinter party is equal to a switch between parties, as the old one is still competing, while voting for a merger or an alliance is not.\textsuperscript{8}

All of the abovementioned party types are rare in the west European context, but all of them – and genuinely new parties and splinters particularly so – add to party system instability, which is why they should be treated differently.

\textit{Success of new parties and splinter parties}

Our second indicator of party system stability is the extent to which new parties have become successful. While one may argue that the full impact of this indicator is already captured by the electoral volatility indicator we believe that there is a qualitative difference between the reshuffling of votes between the same established parties and the support for new ones. New parties are by definition less well known to the public, they lack a track record both in terms of policies and governability as well as coalition patterns. In a party system where the voters face fixed choices and the parties act in a regular and predictable fashion, one would expect the voters to develop allegiances to the parties, limiting the opportunities for new parties to emerge and become successful. A constant flow of successful new parties is thus a good indicator of a party systems’ degree of instability, depending on the new parties’ share of the votes.

As mentioned above, we not only take genuinely new parties into account, but also splinter groups. As there are sometimes more than 50 parties competing in an election it is impossible to track all of them and figure out whether they are new, splinters or established parties. We

\textsuperscript{7} Res Publica and Pro Patria merged before the 2007 Estonian parliamentary elections and got 17.9 percent of the votes. In 2003 they got 31.9 percent together, which puts the volatility figure at 14, divided by 2.

\textsuperscript{8} We distinguish between splinter parties and successor parties. The latter category is made up by parties following from umbrella organizations such as Civic Democratic Party in the Czech Republic which together with a few minor parties emerged from Civic Forum. In these cases, the electoral results of the successor parties are compared with the result of the umbrella organization when counting the volatility score.
have therefore opted to just count new and splinter parties which enter parliament, i.e. the most successful ones. This implies that we somewhat underestimate the votes for such parties, but it is motivated by the fact that parties winning less than 3-4 percent of the vote only have a limited impact on the party system.

Hence, we use the electoral result for new and splinter parties competing in their first election as our second indicator of party system instability. Parties that enter parliament in their second attempt are thus not included in this indicator since they, in this respect, are considered as “old” parties, even if they are new to parliament. The destabilizing effect of these parties is instead included in our other two indicators.

*Parliamentary entries and exits*

Our third and final indicator adds the number of parties outside parliament which manage to win seats in the next election to the number of parliamentary parties failing to be returned. To our knowledge this indicator has not been used before and we believe it adds information about the level of party system stability which the other two indicators miss. This indicator captures the fluctuations of parliamentary parties and the frequency with which the party composition changes. Even if those parties are small, frequent exits and entries constitute in our view a substantial change in the party system, in relation to a situation where the parliamentary parties are constant.

In the empirical analysis we make three types of comparisons: over time on an aggregated level, across countries on an aggregated level and over time for each country individually. We thereby get a very detailed map of the levels of stability and trends of stabilization or destabilization in the region. This analysis provides the basis for a discussion on which factors that may account for the variation. As mentioned in the beginning, we argue that there is an asymmetric path dependent logic accounting for the sustained high levels of instability. This argument will be developed in the final section of the paper.

Our selection of cases, gives us moreover the possibility to control for several other factors, which have been used in the previous literature but are held constant in our study.
First, the ten post-communist EU member states all have parliamentary systems, albeit with slight variations in terms of presidential powers.\textsuperscript{9} Moreover, all countries, except for Lithuania and Hungary, have proportional representation with electoral thresholds ranging from three to five percent and with some countries applying higher thresholds for electoral alliances.\textsuperscript{10} We consider the existing institutional variations between the countries as rather insignificant and highly unlikely to have any effect on the differences in terms of party system instability. Furthermore, the vast majority of countries and elections have been considered democratic since 1990 and the few exceptions to that pattern are so marginal that they hardly can impact the level of party system stability.\textsuperscript{11} Lastly, EU membership was high on the political agenda for all governments in the region since 1990.

The analyses are based on 68 parliamentary elections in the region between 1990 and the end of 2012. Estonia, Hungary and Lithuania have held six elections, Slovakia eight and the rest have held seven elections.\textsuperscript{12} In those countries which have mixed electoral systems we only count the results on the proportional part and not the single district results. In the analysis we do not count the first elections, since all parties by definition are new in a first election after a regime change. We thus count volatility and exit and entries based on the differences between the first and second elections.

Findings

As pointed out in numerous studies, post-communist Central and Eastern Europe stands out in terms of party system instability. In Figure 1, the ten new EU member states’ average level of electoral volatility is compared with countries undergoing democratization at different points in time as well as with contemporary Western Europe. The figure for Central and Eastern

\textsuperscript{9} There is no scholarly consensus on how to categorize the post-communist countries in terms of political system. In our view however, all countries have in effect completely parliamentary systems, except for Poland, which was semi-presidential between 1990 and 1997.

\textsuperscript{10} The 1990 election in Bulgaria also used a mixed election formula as did Romania in 2008 and 2012.

\textsuperscript{11} The main exception is Romania between 1990 and 1995, a period during which it was considered only “partly free” by Freedom House and during which two elections were held, which were not considered completely free and fair. These deviations is not considered to have had any great impact on the electoral result however. Also the first election in Bulgaria was not considered free and fair, albeit cleaner than the Romanian ones and Slovakia was rated “partly free” 1994-1997. All elections were considered completely free and fair however.

\textsuperscript{12} We exclude the elections in early 1990 in the three Baltic states, as they were held under formally Soviet rule and only a few days after the one party system was abolished. We do include the 1990 election in Slovenia though, since it was completely democratic and held without any interference of the federal Yugoslav government. Moreover we include the elections to the Czech and Slovak National Councils in 1990 and 1992, rather than the elections to the national parliament, since the National Councils were transformed into national parliaments after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993.
Europe is almost three times as high as the average level of volatility in nine west European countries during the first twenty years after democratization in the so called “first wave”, as well as for the three countries that re-democratised after the Second World War in the second wave.\textsuperscript{14} It is also interesting to note that Czechoslovakia and Estonia, which were also part of the first wave, had considerably lower levels of volatility during the inter-war years, a period usually regarded as highly unstable and fragmented, than during the post-communist period, which implies that there are no “deep” historic reasons behind the instability the region is witnessing today.\textsuperscript{15}

**Figure 1: Electoral volatility compared**

![Graph showing electoral volatility](image)

**Comment:** The first wave includes Austria 1920-30 (5 elections), Denmark 1918-39 (10), Finland 1919-39 (9), Germany 1920-33 (8), Ireland 1923-37 (6), the Netherlands 1918-37 (6), Norway 1918-36 (7), Sweden 1921-44 (7) and the UK 1929-50 (5). Only elections with universal suffrage are included. The second wave includes Austria 1945-66 (7), Germany 1949-65 (5), and Italy 1945-63 (5). The third wave refers to Greece 1974-93 (8), Portugal 1975-95 (9) and Spain 1977-96 (7). EU15 refers to seven elections in the 15 old member states 1979-2010 (105 elections) and CEE10 refers to the ten new EU member states from Central and Eastern Europe (68 elections). The volatility scores are based on the sum of the differences in party support between two elections divided by two.

\textsuperscript{14} The first wave here refers to Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the UK. Only elections with universal suffrage are included. The second wave includes Austria, Germany and Italy.

\textsuperscript{15} The average electoral volatility in Czechoslovakia 1920-1935 is 19 percent and in Estonia 1920-1932 eleven percent. In both countries the trend is one of decline from the first two elections onwards. In Czechoslovakia the volatility in the last two free elections prior to World War Two was 11 and 17 percent respectively, while the Estonian figures were as low as 7 and 6 percent respectively (Czech Statistical Office & Wikipedia, Elections in Estonia).
Sources: For the first and second waves, Bartolini and Mair (1990). The figures for the third wave, EU15 and CEE10 are calculated on the basis on election results at [www.parties-and-elections.eu](http://www.parties-and-elections.eu) and [www.essex.ac.uk/elections](http://www.essex.ac.uk/elections).

Another highly relevant comparison is with the early third wave countries, i.e. Greece, Portugal and Spain, among which at least the latter two had experienced as long periods of dictatorship without competitive party politics, as the Central European countries. As is shown in the figure, the first twenty years of democratic rule in Southern Europe generated a considerably lower level of electoral volatility, albeit somewhat higher than in the first and second waves.

As volatility has increased during the last decades in Western Europe, it would finally be reasonable to assume that high volatility is a contemporary phenomenon and that it is the timing of democratisation that explains the difference in comparison with previous waves. The average electoral volatility in the last seven elections in EU15 (1979-2010)\(^\text{16}\) is indeed somewhat higher than during the inter-war period, but it is still less than half the level in Central and Eastern Europe. In terms of electoral volatility, it is thus fairly safe to claim that the post-communist countries are significantly less stable than all other clusters of parliamentary countries during the last 100 years or so.

Turning to the second indicator of party system stability – the success of new and splinter parties – the difference between post-communist Europe and the rest is even more pronounced.\(^\text{17}\) In the post-communist countries 57 such parties have entered parliament since 1990, of which 33 are genuinely new. These parties on average won 12.4 percent of the votes, but the variation is naturally very great, ranging from just above four percent to almost 43 percent.\(^\text{18}\)

The inter-war experience in Czechoslovakia and Estonia is very instructive for comparison. In Estonia, despite the lack of parliamentary thresholds, only one new party managed to win seats in parliament during the second, third and fourth free elections 1923-32 and it only


\(^\text{17}\) As the first and second waves of democratization in Western Europe in general was merely a continuation of the old and less democratic party politics, comparison with the post-communist states is not that relevant.

\(^\text{18}\) Genuinely new parties that managed to win seats to parliament on average won 7.8 percent and splinter parties won 5 percent.
obtained 4.4 percent of the votes (Wikipedia; Elections in Estonia). In Czechoslovakia, the only new parties to enter parliament with more than just a tiny share of the votes were the Czechoslovak Communist Party (a splinter from the Social Democratic Party) and the Sudeten German Party (a merger between several German parliamentary parties), which entered parliament in 1925 and 1935 with 13 and 15 percent of the votes respectively (Czech Statistical Office). Moreover, looking at Spain and Portugal, there are very few new parties winning seats in parliament. In fact, no new party has as yet managed to win seats in Spain. From the third election on, the parliament has been dominated by the two major parties, the People’s Party (PP) and the Social Democratic Party (PSOE). In Portugal the parties competing in the first free election in 1975 went in and out in different electoral coalitions during the first ten years after democracy was restored, but only one new party has up to date managed to win parliamentary representation.

In Western Europe new and splinter parties have had less frequent and much more modest success. In the 105 elections held in 15 West European countries 1979-210 that we include for comparison (see footnote 16), a total of 31 parties entered parliament (18 splinters and 13 genuinely new parties). Most have won only between 1 and 5 percent of the votes however and only three new parties have won more than eight percent in their first election: The Progressive Democrats in Ireland in 1987 (12 percent), Forza Italia in Italy in 1994 (21 percent), and List Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands in 2002 (17 percent). It is also noticeable that these elections in Ireland, Italy and the Netherlands were followed by elections with considerable decreasing electoral volatility and with modest, or no, success for new parties.

It is also interesting to note that the much lower volatility rates in the established democracies in the West to a much higher extent are driven by shifts among established parties, rather than by the success of new and splinter parties (15 percent). That is in stark contrast to the new democracies, where the much higher rate, to a higher degree is a function of the success of such parties (46 percent). This finding further stresses the difference between the two sets of countries even more and will arguably make party system stabilization more difficult. Why that is will be discussed in the following section.

19 In 1932, two new parties competed, but they were both the result of mergers between previously represented parties in parliament and are thus not considered as new.
In conclusion, in comparison with other relevant countries, the post-communist party systems turn out to be considerably more turbulent also in terms of successful new and splinter parties and parliamentary exits and entries.

**Diverse patterns and trends of party system stability**

The post-communist countries are far from homogenous in terms of electoral instability however. In figure 2, the mean volatility scores for the ten countries between 1990 and 2012 are shown. The first observation is that all scores are high. Even the relatively more stable party systems such as the Czech Republic’s and Hungary’s, have substantially higher levels of electoral volatility than the Western European average. The other observation is that there are big differences between the lowest and highest scores. Latvia and Lithuania stand out as much more unstable than the others, with the former country scoring almost twice as high as the Czech Republic.

**Figure 2: Mean electoral volatility in the 10 CEE EU member states 1990-2012**

![Graph showing mean electoral volatility](image)

**Comment:** Volatility is based on the sum of the differences in party support between two elections divided by two. Only parties that gained seats in parliament in either of the two elections are counted separately. The rest is lumped together and calculated according to the same principle. Mergers are counted on the basis of the merging parties’ combined votes in the previous election. The total number of elections is 68.

**Source:** For the elections before 2000: [www.essex.ac.uk/elections](http://www.essex.ac.uk/elections). For the more recent elections: [www.parties-and-elections-eu](http://www.parties-and-elections-eu)

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20 There is admittedly large variations also in Western Europe, ranging from 5.9 in the UK and 21.3 in the Netherlands during the period 1979-2010. Already the second most volatile country, Italy, scores well below the most stable post-communist country, however, which implies that there indeed is a sharp divide between the old and the new member states.
The differences within the region are even greater when we look at the combined success for new and splinter parties. In figure 3, the share of the votes for new and splinter parties that manage to win parliamentary representation in the first election they contested is compared across the ten post-communist countries. Again Lithuania and Latvia, together with Bulgaria, display the highest level of instability, where on average such parties manage to win between 18 and almost 20 percent of the votes in every election.\textsuperscript{21} In Hungary, by contrast, only one such party has managed to enter the parliament during the post-communist period.

It is also noticeable that it is the success of new parties that accounts for the big variation across the region, whereas splinter party successes are much more evenly distributed. In the three Baltic States and Bulgaria new parties make up the vast majority of the success of such parties and splinter parties have had much more modest success in comparison, which may imply that the electorate does not suffice with a new party with the same old faces, but rather prefer something brand new. New parties reach an impressive 16 percent on average in Bulgaria and around 14 per cent in Latvia and Lithuania.\textsuperscript{22}

\textbf{Figure 3: Support for new and splinter parties entering parliament 1990-2012}

\textsuperscript{21} It should be noted that votes for new and splinter parties are included in the volatility score as well, which implies that the variations in figures 2 and 3 are related.

\textsuperscript{22} It should be noted that there are a few parties which mainly drive these figures: NDSV and GERB in Bulgaria 2001 & 2009, The People’s Party, New Era and the Reform Party in Latvia 1998, 2002 and 2011 and New Union and Labour Party in Lithuania 2000 and 2004.
Comment: Only the new and splinter parties that won seats in their first contested election and which also passed the electoral threshold are counted. The total number of parties is 57. The total number of elections is 68.
Source: For the electoral results before 2000: www.essex.ac.uk/elections and www.parties-and-elections.eu for the more recent elections. For the classification of parties, see Bugajski (2002) and Rose and Munro (2009).

Finally, comparing the number of entries and exits to parliament shows a considerable flow of parties coming and going between elections. In Slovakia and Latvia, more than three parties on average either exit or enter parliament in each election, which again implies a high level of party system instability, in particular considering the high share of the votes these entry parties get on average. Even in the relatively stable Hungary, parties come and go to quite a high extent, which taken together with the other indicators leaves an impression of high levels of party instability in the whole region on an aggregate level.

Figure 4: Parliamentary turnover 1990-2012

Comment: The figure includes parties outside parliament which manage to win seats, given that they cleared the electoral threshold, and parliamentary parties losing all their seats. We do not consider a merger between two parliamentary parties as an exit, in case they manage to retain seats in parliament. The number of elections is 68.
Source: www.parties-and-elections.eu

The aggregate levels of instability certainly tell us a great deal about the post-communist region. The country scores could, however, be driven by extreme results in one election or be a function of initial instability, which may have been decreasing for a number of elections. Hence, we now turn to the trends of party system stability over time, in order to find out
whether there are any indications of stabilization going on. We start with the aggregate trends
over time and thereafter analyse the trends on a country basis.

Figures 5, 6 and 7 (see appendix) are just to quickly illustrate our main point; namely that
there is no trend of party system stabilisation in the ten CEE EU member countries, as the
regression line is almost flat. Figure 5 displays the volatility level per year in the 58 elections
counted, showing the majority of cases clustering just below the 30 percent mark, but with a
considerable number above 35. At the other end, only four cases fall on or below the 10
percent mark and very few others below 15 percent, which is still above the average level in
Western Europe. In figure 6, the same elections are displayed but organised according to the
sequence of election. Figure 7 show the share of votes won by new and splinter parties by
year. Only in 22 of the 58 elections such parties failed to gain parliamentary representation
and 17 elections they won more than 20 percent of the votes. In none of the three figures there
are any discernible trend, either in a stabilising or destabilising direction.

Turning to our three indicators of stability and tracing them aggregately over time, figure 8
displays an overall trend which is seemingly one of increased instability on all three
 indicators, even though only the indicator on new and splinter party entrance reaches its
highest level in the seventh elections.\(^{23}\) It should be remembered that three countries, Estonia,
Hungary and Lithuania, have still not held their seventh elections, so the final figures may
drop somewhat, but even if no more new or splinter parties would enter parliament in the
seventh elections, the average level would still be higher than in all previous elections, except
for the second. Also in terms of volatility the remaining elections need to produce very stable
results if the curve would dip below the 25 percent mark. The number of exit and entry
parties, finally vary quite modestly, but on a level which indicate continuous party system
turbulence in the region.

\(^{23}\) In the seventh elections, several new and splinter parties won significant support, also in countries where such
parties previously had been without success: the new GERB in Bulgaria party won 39,7 percent of the votes,
more than twice as much as the runner up. In Slovakia, the new Freedom and Solidarity (SAS) won 12,1 percent
finishing third. Most surprising however was the success of one new and one splinter party in the Czech
elections, in which Public Affairs (VV) won 10,9 percent and TOP09 won 16,7, finishing third. In Slovenia, the
new Positive Slovenia came in first with 28,5 percent and in Latvia the Reform Party became the second biggest
party with 20,8 percent. In Romania, finally, the People's Party - Dan Diaconescu, became the first new party to
enter parliament with 14 percent of the votes.
Figure 8: Mean percent of votes for new parties and splinters, mean volatility and mean number of entries and exits in the 1st-7th elections in the ten CEE EU member states

Comment: The left hand scale shows the average percentage of electoral volatility and party support for new and splinter parties and the right hand scale shows the average number of exit and entry parties. Electoral volatility is based on the sum of the differences in party support between two elections divided by two. Only parties that gained seats in parliament in either of the two elections are counted separately. The rest is lumped together and calculated according to the same principle. Mergers are counted on the basis of the merging parties’ combined votes in the previous election. Only the new and splinter parties that won seats in their first contested election and which also passed the electoral threshold are counted. Entries and exits include parties outside parliament which manage to win seats, given that they cleared the parliamentary threshold, and parliamentary parties losing all their seats. We do not consider a merger between two parliamentary parties as an exit, in case they manage to retain seats in parliament. The number of elections is 68.

Source: Own calculations based on election results at www.parties-and-elections.eu; www.essex.ac.uk/elections; For data about the parties, see Bugajski (2002) and Rose and Munro (2009).

The aggregated level over time thus shows an overall increasing trend of instability. We now turn to the individual countries in order to find out whether these trends are driven by just a few of the countries or if the trend is consistent throughout the whole region.

Figure 9a-j (see appendix) maps the trends on our three indicators in all ten new EU member states. There is certainly not any uniform pattern applying to all countries; in some countries the curves go down, in others they go up; in still others they swing back and forth and in addition from different levels of instability.
The overall trend seems to be clear though. The majority of countries either shows an increasing trend of instability or keep a constant high level of instability, even if the curves in the most recent election go down. Bulgaria, Slovenia and arguably also the Czech Republic have all seen increasing levels of instability, with the latest elections being among the most turbulent ones, reaching very high levels on all indicators. The Czech Republic used to be considered to have one of the most stable party systems in the regions, but for two consecutive elections the instability has increased, although from previously modest levels. Thus, the last election in 2010 could be a one off event, after which the levels will stabilize on the lower levels again, but considering the direction of the trends we would still regard it as a case of increasing instability.

As shown in the figures above, Latvia and Lithuania display the highest levels of instability on most indicators on an aggregated level. Also in the last elections (2011 and 2012 respectively), the levels are very high, even if they decreased somewhat from the extremely high levels in the previous elections. Thus, even if the curves are going down, the levels of instability are still far too high, with volatility at around 30 percent, new and splinter parties winning 21 and 8 percent respectively and two and three parties either entering or exiting parliament, to claim that their party systems are stabilising.

Two countries, however, do indeed show signs of increasing stability: Estonia and Poland. Estonia started out with high levels of instability, which thereafter have declined for two consecutive elections, reaching comparably low levels in the sixth elections. Poland witnessed an increased stability from the peak of turbulence in the fourth election in 2001. Thereafter the party system has stabilized considerably, with a volatility rate of only 10 percent in the last election, down from 36 percent in the fourth. In the last election a new party managed to get 10 percent of the votes however, but that did not have relatively little practical affect for government formation. It does indicate though that Poland is still not immune to the emergence and success of these types of parties.

Slovakia has witnessed sharp swings, usually on a quite high level of instability. In the last (8th) election the figures went down, but that may be due to the short interval between the last two elections (18 months). Also in Hungary, the data is to divergent to speak of trends in any direction. The party system seemed to stabilize in the fourth and fifth elections, only to reach highly unstable levels in the sixth, at which all indicators reached their highest levels so far.
As with Slovakia it is too soon to tell whether the last election constitute the beginning of trend (of instability in the case of Hungary and the opposite in Slovakia) or if things will go back to the normal level in the next one.

In Romania finally the party system was relatively stabilized already by the third election and during the last three elections the levels have been kept at a constant relatively low level, however on par with the most unstable elections in Western Europe. As mentioned above, a new party managed to win representation for the first time in the last election, at least partly breaking the pattern of stability.

**Explaining the lack of stabilization**

The results from the previous section seem clear enough: twenty years after the democratization, party systems in Central and Eastern Europe are still much less stable than in Western Europe. Even though the economic situation has improved, political instability remains. While stabilization in the future cannot be ruled out, there are very little empirical data so far indicating the start of such a process. This is due to what we call the logic of asymmetric path-dependency of party system stabilization. By that we mean that the reinforcing logic, or the lock-in mechanism, is much stronger in situations of instability than in situations of stability. To put it in another way, instability breeds instability, whereas stability not necessarily breeds further stability. That implies two things; first that countries with stable party systems always are vulnerable to potential challenges and second, once instability prevails, it is very difficult to move back to a stable situation again.

We test this hypothesis by analysing the correlation between previous and present electoral volatility. In figure 10 we demonstrate that the correlation between the levels of electoral volatility in two consecutive election is quite strong, .378 and significant at 0.05 level.
Comment: Volatility (Pedersen Index) is based on the sum of the differences in party support between two elections divided by two. Only parties that gained seats in parliament in either of the two elections are counted separately. The rest is lumped together and calculated according to the same principle. Mergers are counted on the basis of the merging parties’ combined votes in the previous election. The total number of elections is 68.

Source: For the elections before 2000: www.essex.ac.uk/elections. For the more recent elections: www.parties-and-elections-eu

When controlling for a economic growth, unemployment rates and level of corruption (Table 1), the effect of the previuos level of volatility is still significant, wheras the other factors are not. It should be noted that this is only a first preliminary test and that further and more extensive test will follow. But the results so far obviuosly point in the direction of a path dependent logic.
### Table 1: Explaining volatility

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>0.694</td>
<td>0.406</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP growth</td>
<td>-0.966</td>
<td>0.530</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corruption</td>
<td>-0.710</td>
<td>1.926</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous volatility</td>
<td>0.473***</td>
<td>0.165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>15.275</td>
<td>(12,221)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Adjusted R-square**: 0.235

Needless to say, we do not consider this deterministically, even though there are very countries anywhere that have managed to move towards a stable situation after having been instable for a longer period of time. As has been frequently noted, the party systems in Western Europe rather slide towards less stability than vice versa. There are naturally examples of temporary shocks to party system stability, like the Danish election of 1973, but Denmark was neither unstable before that election, nor for a longer period of time after. The reason for the lack of examples of radical changes from instability to stability is of course the rather stable situations which have been present in Europe during most of the last century. Nevertheless, the absence of examples of stabilisation over time, make a strong case for claiming that “asymmetric” path dependency is the reason why many of the post-communist systems still have not stabilised, almost 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

**Discussion**

Our theoretical model looks like this: A number of factors going back to the communist period have made the region more prone to instability (see Mair, 1997). In particular the effects of the economic reform process, which brought severe hardship to a large share of the populations in the region, in combination with politicians promising quick recoveries and catch up with the west, made the populations very dissatisfied with political institutions in

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24 Poland may be an example. Romania is not, however, as it has not yet experienced any earthquake election, after which restabilization may be difficult.

25 For the sake of clarity it should be pointed out that there is also a strong case for “positive” path dependency, which is the essence of the freezing hypothesis advocated by Lipset and Rokkan (1967). Even if it has been challenged, the west and south European experience, in general support the prevailing pattern of relative stability across time. But as we have witnessed countries moving from stability to instability in the post-communist region – e.g. Bulgaria - makes us believe that the forcing logic of the negative lock in mechanism is even stronger.
general and with political parties in particular. This resulted in constant shifts in governments between more or less each election, as the voters very quickly fell out with the incumbents, due to the perception that they failed to deliver what was promised or what was expected (cf Pop-Eleches, 2010). In some countries, the established parties were given more than one chance in office, before the exasperated electorate opted for new alternatives. In other countries, new parties made substantial inroads already at an early stage.

The driving logic behind the party system instability so far has thus been the constant dissatisfaction with the performance of the political actors. It would then be reasonable to assume that once the post-communist countries are catching up and even overtake some western countries in terms of economic prosperity and once the levels of corruption has reached “western “ levels, the party systems will follow suit and stabilize. We do not think that will necessarily happen however. We would rather believe that party system instability will prevail and live their own lives even if the unemployment figures decrease and corruption is successfully dealt with. This forecast is partly based on the fact that votes for new parties make up a remarkably large proportion of the volatility and partly on the fact that there are no signs so far of a decrease in the turnover of parliamentary parties. As discussed by several scholars in the field, the path-dependent mechanism is about the incentive structures for the voters on the one hand and the parties or the political entrepreneurs on the other (Rose and Munro 2003). In an unstable party system context, there are few incentives for voters or politicians to act in a way that leads to more stability as the potential gains to field a new party in an election is high, which implies that both splinters and mergers as well as new parties should be more common than in a stable system, in which the costs normally outweighs the benefits (Cf Sikk, 2005: 399). As the supply of new contenders in every election is high and the risk that a vote for such a party becomes a wasted ballot is small, the incentives for the voters to try out new alternatives are high as well. Those incentives are naturally enhanced in a context of economic hardship and corruption, which happen to be pronounced features of post-communist politics and which has resulted in changing governments after every election.

26 The average balance scores (tend to trust – tend not to trust) regarding political parties between 2001 and 2009 range between -53 (Estonia) and -72 (Bulgaria). The average for all countries are -66 (Candidate countries Eurobarometer 2001, 2002, 2003.2 and 2004.1; Eurobarometer 63, 64, 68, 69 and 71).

28 In fact, the rate of wasted votes have decreased over time in almost all countries, which implies that the electorate is not simply throwing their ballots at any new alternatives that emerge on the scene, but rather make rational choices by strategically voting for new parties which have been visible in the media and which stand a good chance to pass the electoral threshold (cf Bielasiak, 2005). That makes us believe even stronger that new parties have a bright future in post-communist party politics for years to come.
with few exceptions. To a surprisingly large degree, the stabilization trends seem independent of economic cycles.\(^\text{29}\)

We argue that due to the asymmetrical path dependency, the party system turbulence will persist irrespective of the factors that triggered it in the first place and irrespective of the factors that account for the different levels of it today. Party systems that started out at quite modest levels of instability and which retained the stability rates during the first elections, have been caught in a reinforcing spiral of instability, once it happened. Bulgaria is the clearest example of that. After switching between left and right in the 1990s, the Bulgarian voters have declared different winners in the last four elections while harshly punishing the incumbents. The winners of the 1997 election, United Democratic Forum, lost two thirds of its votes in 2001 and have not recovered since then. The newly founded National Movement King Simeon won almost 43 percent of the votes in 2001 lost every second voter in 2005 and did not even manage to retain its seats in parliament after the 2009 elections. Instead another brand new party, Citizens for a European Development, popped up shortly before the elections, eventually winning 39 percent of the votes.

What are the implications of this persistent instability? We agree with Allan Sikk (2005: 409) that “one has to be careful about praising [stability] to high”). As Sikk writes, the combination of low volatility and few entries of new parties with a general dissatisfaction with the existing parties and declining electoral turnout, it is doubtful whether stability in that sense furthers democracy. High stability might in these cases instead be a sign of an “unhealthy closedness of the political scene” where the voters do not have any real alternatives beyond abstaining to vote. Romania could be an example of this, with a party system that according to our study is one of the most stable in the region but also one of the countries which are often rated as one of the regions worst, when it comes to democratic performance.

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\(^{29}\) The only factor that has a statistically significant effect among the "usual suspects" is unemployment, whereas corruption, GDP per capita, GDP annual growth and even the number of parliamentary parties have not. The fact that the poorest country in the region is the only one which has been fairly stable over time is a case in point.
References


Eurobarometer 63, 64, 68, 69 & 71 European Commission, Brussels.


Appendix

Figure 5: Electoral volatility 1990-2012

Comment: Volatility is based on the sum of the differences in party support between two elections divided by two. Only parties that gained seats in parliament in either of the two elections are counted separately. The rest is lumped together and calculated according to the same principle. Mergers are counted on the basis of the merging parties’ combined votes in the previous election. The total number of elections is 68.

Source: For the elections before 2000: www.essex.ac.uk/elections. For the more recent elections: www.parties-and-elections.eu
Figure 6: Electoral volatility in the 2nd-8th elections

**Comment**: Volatility is based on the sum of the differences in party support between two elections divided by two. Only parties that gained seats in parliament in either of the two elections are counted separately. The rest is lumped together and calculated according to the same principle. Mergers are counted on the basis of the merging parties’ combined votes in the previous election. The total number of elections is 68.

**Source**: For the elections before 2000: [www.essex.ac.uk/elections](http://www.essex.ac.uk/elections). For the more recent elections: [www.parties-and-elections-eu](http://www.parties-and-elections-eu)
Comment: Only the new and splinter parties that won seats in their first contested election and which also passed the electoral threshold are counted. The total number of parties is 57. The total number of elections is 68.

Source: For the electoral results before 2000: www.essex.ac.uk/elections and www.parties-and-elections.eu for the more recent elections. For the classification of parties, see Bugajski (2002) and Rose and Munro (2009).
Figures 9a-9j: Party system instability, 1\textsuperscript{st}-7\textsuperscript{th} elections by country

Figure 9a: Bulgaria

Figure 9b: The Czech Republic
Figure 9c: Estonia

Figure 9d: Hungary
Figure 9e: Latvia

Figure 9f: Lithuania
Comment: The left hand scale shows the average percentage of electoral volatility and party support for new and splinter parties and the right hand scale shows the average number of exit and entry parties. Electoral volatility is based on the sum of the differences in party support between two elections divided by two. Only parties that gained seats in parliament in either of the two elections are counted separately. The rest is lumped together and calculated according to the same principle. Mergers are counted on the basis of the merging parties’ combined votes in the previous election. Only the new and splinter parties that won seats in their first contested election and which also passed the electoral threshold are counted. Entries and exits include parties outside parliament which manage to win seats, given that they cleared the parliamentary threshold, and parliamentary parties losing all their seats. We do not consider a merger between two parliamentary parties as an exit, in case they manage to retain seats in parliament. The number of elections is 60.

Source: Own calculations based on election results at www.parties-and-elections.de; www.essex.ac.uk/elections; For data about the parties, see Bugajski (2002) and Rose and Munro (2009).