

Understanding Developing European Party Systems: A Case Study of Czechoslovakia

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This study focuses on an underdeveloped area in the analysis of post-Communist East-Central Europe: democratizing party systems. The transformation of party systems in this part of the world from one party-dominated to multiparty, democratic systems now impels political scientists to reorient their theoretical and conceptual approaches to reflect the winds of change. Because the Czechoslovak party system of 1990-1992 was a multiparty, segmented one with a number of destabilizing elements, Sartori's "polarized pluralism" typology (1976) can be applied to analyze the nature of that party system and what the future may hold for the new Czech and Slovak systems. As the groundwork is laid in the analyses of Central and Eastern European party systems, further investigation using Western European party systems literature may help us focus and conceptualize the competing forces that shape the democratization process in these party systems.

With the transformation of party systems in Eastern Europe from primarily authoritarian, one party-dominated to democratic, multi-party systems, the analysis of "European" party and electoral structures takes on added importance for the evaluation of these new systems' capabilities and prospects of attaining some level of political stability. This article seeks to employ a traditional theoretical approach that is applied to multi-party Western European party systems. The inchoate democratic party systems of Central and Eastern Europe necessitate new descriptive and analytical paradigms in order to evaluate the developing ideological currents in these societies. The use of Western models of party system development and persistence may be needed to shed light on the systemic developments in many of these highly segmented societies. At a time when the qualitative, descriptive and analytical techniques of past political and social science research are seen as old-fashioned, this study suggests that, first, the traditional party systems approaches used from the 1950s to the 1970s in the analyses of Western European party systems may be appropriate frameworks for studying system developments in Central and Eastern European party systems. Second, despite its shortcomings, Sartori's typology of party systems can be applied to the Czechoslovak party system in the era of

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unitary democratization (1990-1992); however, it may not be applicable in the newly evolving era of separatism due to endogenous ethnic cleavages and other systemic factors that affect political development. Hence, another type of institutional analytical framework, such as Lijphart's (1968) consociational paradigm, may be appropriate, especially in analyzing the Slovak party system. Finally, although this article specifically investigates the analytical utility of a West European party systems framework (Sartori's) within an East-Central European context (Czechoslovakia), it seeks to illuminate the need for applying existing democratic party systems frameworks, and the development of new or fresh conceptual approaches, in investigating the newly developing polities of central and eastern Europe.

West and East European Party Systems: Bridging the Gaps

In studying the development of Western European party systems we first must begin to understand the tenets of democracy and political and economic development in competitive, market-oriented societies. To explicate the numerous theoretical frameworks, which is necessary for adequate philosophical and analytical comprehension, would require a separate delineation and macro-analysis of conceptual and theoretical paradigms for democratic institutional development. Although this study is concerned with a more micro-oriented analysis of party systems in democratizing polities, the systematic investigation of broad-gauged democratic development in politically and economically underdeveloped states is not its objective.¹

To correctly investigate the democratizing party systems of East-Central Europe one must become familiar with the structures and functions of parliamentary forms of government. The legislative and electoral models that these developing states have borrowed are from their neighbors in the western part of the continent. As a result, students of European politics now must drop the prefixes, West and East, from their sub-areas of expertise. The transformation of East and Central Europe's party systems from a virtually non-existent system, in which a one-party dominated model controlled all aspects of government, to a pluralistic, competitive electoral system compels us to train students of party democracy with a broader grounding in all European states. Hence, as Roskin notes, we must attempt to apply the democratic models of the West to the analysis of the embryonic systems of the East:

The skills needed to study East Europe are now in large measure the skills long used to study West Europe. This is not to say that the old East Europe specialists are no longer needed. What we need is "cross-training" between East Europe and West

Europe specialists. The former must add such approaches as public opinion, interest groups, elections, and legislative behavior, while the latter must add language, historical and geographic expertise. East European politics has not suddenly become the same as West European politics, but it has started to resemble it, lagging behind it by several decades (Roskin 1991, 5).

As comparative approaches to the study of East-Central and Western European politics coalesce, few scholars are racing to bridge the gaps caused by the demise of Communism in the East. However, there are a few notable exceptions.² To understand the direction in which the literature on the development of European party systems may proceed, a short review of West European party systems literature is warranted.

The Literature on Western European Party Systems

Historically, party development in Europe (viz., Western Europe) has been conceptualized reflecting the sociological mode of analysis. Broad comparative themes—historical and philosophical (economic, political, and social)—tended to dominate discussions of party formulation and of elite domination within the party. Early party analysts, such as Ostrogorski (1902) and Michels (1911), sought ideological justifications for the empirical developments within the bureaucratic machinery of parties. Later, Duverger (1954) combined an historical description of parties and their doctrines and elite membership with a scientific analysis of party organization. With the sociology of political party development *en vogue*, Lipset and Rokkan (1967) explained party system change and development using the economic cleavages of occupational class and the political cleavages of territory; i.e., region, ethnicity and religion. Finally, Sartori's (1976) theoretical framework classifies party systems centering around measurement of the power or impact of segmental and ideological forces within a party system.

The use of Sartori's framework, though limited in its analytical and descriptive capabilities, may provide a useful model for interpreting developments in East-Central European party systems. This study specifically will apply Sartori's typology of polarized pluralism to the Czechoslovak party system between 1990 and 1992. Moreover, its applicability in light of events since the 1992 elections leads to academic conjecture about the utility of traditional West European party models for understanding democratizing systems in East-Central Europe. Given the failure of the Czechoslovak unitary system, other analytical frameworks may provide insights into the segmented nature of Czech and Slovak politics.

The History of the Czechoslovak Party System

To use Sartori's nomenclature, Czechoslovakia was a "hegemonic" party system from 1947 until the 8-9 June 1990 elections (Sartori 1990, 327). Under the hegemonic system the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPCz) ruled the country in a totalitarian manner. In the 1946 Czechoslovak elections—the last free elections held until the June 1990 elections—the CPCz won a plurality of the vote (38 percent) in the Czechoslovak regions, despite the fact that the Democratic Party won 62 percent of the vote in Slovakia (Kaplan 1989, 150). After the 1946 election, Czechoslovakia was known for its federated make-up, with some home rule granted to a semi-autonomous Slovak national assembly. However, this did not last long, for in 1947 the CPCz formally took control of the state in a successful *coup d'état*. As a result, the CPCz became the dominant party in the Czechoslovak Republic, and eventually the party outlawed opposition parties. In practice, however, a number of satellite parties were allowed to persist.

Despite minor changes in the "Czechoslovakist" policies of the CPCz, the totalitarian regime did not emit structural reform until the mid-1960s, prior to the legendary "Prague Spring" (Kusin 1990, 8). Here the CPCz, led by the Slovak Alexander Dubcek, began to question the legitimacy of what was called "obstinate unitarism." This is the traditional Slovak criticism of the Prague-based centralism stemming from the early days of the republic under President Thomas G. Masaryk. This criticism was carried over into the Czechoslovak Communist era because of the regime's continued use of Prague-centered, Czech-dominated approaches to decision-making and allocation of resources. According to Skilling,³ the party-sponsored reforms not only included more Slovak autonomy, but other "radical" political, social and economic measures as well. These included reform of the economy, with integration of the command system with a market system; press, cultural and intellectual freedoms; the introduction of pluralism into the Czechoslovak political system, with interest group and trade association representation; and "the democratization of politics" (Skilling 1989, 247). Although these measures were suppressed with the invocation of the Brezhnev Doctrine and outside military intervention in August 1968, the spirit of democratic change was not fully contained.

From this period until 1989 the neo-Stalinist policies of the regime were enforced rigidly and the historical democratic socialist heritage of the Czech nation was manifested in the writings of dissident playwright Vaclav Havel, as his letters from prison were leaked to the West. In a 1975 letter to Czechoslovak President Husak he rebukes the party leader for the rigid authoritarian system that denied basic human and political rights to Czecho-

slovaks after the "normalization" following the Prague Spring period (Havel 1991, 50-83). Following the Gorbachev-inspired thaw seen in other East European polities, Czechoslovaks showed their contempt for the regime in November of 1989 as demonstrations in Prague and other places led to the peaceful dismemberment of the "powers that be" (Ash 1990, 90-92). With the formulation of the Government for National Understanding, an executive comprised mostly of non-Communists that effectively replaced the ruling party central committee, the first non-Communist government since 1946 formally was installed in December, 1989. At that time Havel was selected as the interim president of the newly democratizing nation. The one-time dissident was recognized for his prominent role in forming Civic Forum as the opposition movement that led to the success of the "Velvet Revolution" of that November.

The Czechoslovak Party System: Applying Sartori's Polarized Pluralism

According to Sartori, four key features will characterize a highly competitive democratic party system where extreme pluralism has evolved. First, the system will be a multi-party one where more than one party competes for elected positions. Second, the political context will be highly segmented; i.e., laden with ethnic and regional fragmentation. Third, a relatively high level of polarization, i.e., ideological fragmentation, will prevail. Finally, a number of competing centrifugal forces will lead the system toward increased fragmentation. Despite its conceptual limitations, which include few attempts⁴ to apply it to central European party systems in the era of democratization, Sartori's model may be an appropriate framework for analyzing the Czechoslovak party system of the years 1990-1992. Within Sartori's model, defining categories include: (1) the presence of "relevant anti-system parties;" (2) "bilateral oppositions;" (3) broad-based coalition parties at the center; (4) a system that discourages centripetal competition and encourages ideological distance between parties on basic policies; (5) "centrifugal drives over centripetal ones" will be found in the system; (6) "congenital ideological patterning" will evolve; (7) "irresponsible oppositions;" and (8) the "politics of outbidding" (Sartori 1990, 328-355).

The post-Communist Czechoslovak party system was known for its anti-system parties. The Slovak National Party (SNS) and the Movement for Self-Governing Democracy-Society for Moravia and Silesia (HDS) sought a policy of separatism and devolution, respectively. These parties replaced the fascist or communist parties that played historic anti-system roles in

European polities. In non-polarized party systems we would find unilateral opposition to the Government, as in Britain with the historical "opposition" role of the Labour Party. However, in a fragmented system we would find it hard to galvanize support for a consolidated opposition. For example, in Czechoslovakia the largest party in the Federal Assembly after the June, 1990 elections was the CPCz, with 47 seats (in the two houses), but it was not able to form an opposition with other minority parties, such as the Czech Christian and Democratic Union and the Slovak Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), because these latter center-right parties were closer to the governing coalition of parties than was the CPCz. The CPCz thus is referred to as a "counter-opposition."

Polarized pluralist systems, of which democratizing Czechoslovakia may have been analogous, are known for a coalition of parties at the center. This phenomenon tends to discourage centripetal forces. The June, 1990 elections evinced this system requisite as the Czech Civic Forum and the Slovak Public Against Violence (VPN) teamed to win 170 seats in the bicameral Federal Assembly. In winning the parliamentary elections, this broad umbrella of "moderate, centrist" parties and groups made it impossible for centripetal elements to affect the configuration of party alignments.

Rather, the enlarged center now set the stage for increased fragmentation due to centrifugal forces in the system. Sartori refers to large ideological space between the parties as "congenital ideological patterning" (Sartori 1990, 332; Pehe 1990, 12), which refers to the disparities that the sundry parties display on both fundamental and secondary issue positions. For example, the Civic Forum/VPN ruling coalition crumbled in February, 1991, when Federal Assembly delegates divided between a left-of-center caucus and a right-of-center group. The former of these was the Liberal Club—later called the Civic Movement—comprised of 42 deputies; while the latter consisted of 40 deputies led by then-Finance Minister Vaclav Klaus (who later was the Czechoslovak Prime Minister at the time of separation, and is now the Czech leader), which subsequently became known as the Civic Democratic Party. The Civic Movement, led by Jiri Dientsbier, wanted social safeguards, a gradualist political program, and an interventionist economic agenda. This conformed to the wishes of former President Havel, who was known for his very cautious optimism about democracy. The members of Civic Movement wanted a loose organizational structure. In contrast, Klaus' party advocated a free-market economic program that would focus on lessening government intervention in political and social affairs. These ideological differences were to affect developments in the party system, ultimately leading to the demise of the embryonic Czechoslovak democratic state (Pehe 1992a).

Because the center is occupied in a polarized pluralist system, extreme parties will not factor into the governing equation. Yet, they will serve to augment polarization and further erode the governing coalition's viability at the center. In Czechoslovakia, after the June 1990 elections, Slovaks wanted decentralization of economic decision-making and this helped the SNS become more effective in appealing electorally to disenchanting Slovaks by the June 1992 elections.

Finally, the politics of outbidding emphasizes the market approach to political bargaining and the allocation of seats in the Czechoslovak federal assembly. Because parties make promises they cannot keep, deputies and constituents may become disillusioned with the process, and increased polarization within the political spectrum will occur. Because of the highly ideological character of the Czechoslovak system, and the centripetal forces within it, Roskin argues that systems such as Czechoslovakia's could "end in calamity, as demonstrated in Germany and Spain in the 1930s" (Roskin 1992, 9). Moreover, the politics of outbidding was witnessed in Slovakia between 1990 and 1992, where parties sought to appeal to political and economic aspects of nationalism. Although most Slovaks at that time wanted some type of confederal setup, the parties pushed the political discourse to "outright separatism" (Roskin 1992, 16).

Of course, the ideologically fragmented Czechoslovak party system of 1990-1992 quickly lost the euphoria that had surrounded the Velvet Revolution of 1989. By 1991 over 14 parties claimed representation in the Federal Assembly, compared to the original six after the 1990 elections. Given the centrifugal forces of polarized pluralism, Sartori's model seems at least applicable in analyzing the gridlock that developed in the effort to establish Czechoslovakia's democratic party system.

The 1992 Election and Separatism: The End of the Czechoslovak Party System

The extent to which the polarization and segmentation created a polarized pluralist party system in Czechoslovakia prior to the 1992 elections will continue to be a subject of great debate. However, the developments within the Czechoslovak party system since the June, 1992 elections warrant a general overview in order to understand the changes that took place on the road to the dissolution of the Federal Assembly on 1 January 1993. In the 5-6 June 1992 elections, the House of the People—with its 150 seats based proportionally to the population in the Czech and Slovak lands—returned a coalition favoring Klaus' Civic Democratic Party. However, the 150-seat House of the Nations, the body that gave an equal number of votes to both

Czechs and Slovaks, was stalemated. With 37 seats for the Civic Democrats and 33 seats for Meciar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, little hope for the polarized agendas of the two pragmatic leaders was seen (*The Economist* 1992). Given the polarization between Czechs and Slovaks, and due to the role of high-profile elites such as Klaus, Meciar and Havel, debate on the future of the federal system spiraled downward as the competing leaders could not agree on a common future for their peoples. As a result, on 25 November 1992, the Czechoslovak Federal Assembly voted to dissolve itself on 1 January 1993 and return political power to the national (regional) parliaments (Pehe 1992b). Separatism had been achieved.

As seen above, most of this was rooted in the polarized pluralism within the party system: disagreement on fundamental issues such as the pace of privatization, changes in macroeconomic structure and whether a social safety net should be strictly maintained, given the economic problems of democratization. Despite the "velvet divorce," the new Czech Republic and Slovak Republic will develop at radically different paces, given (1) the ideologies of the popular parties within the new autonomous party systems, and (2) the pace of foreign investment, which is occurring at a greater speed in the Czech lands.

Conclusion: Understanding Developing European Party Systems

The development and destruction of the Czechoslovak party system between 1990 and 1992, and the subsequent creation of autonomous Czech and Slovak states with their own party systems undoubtedly leaves a number of questions in the minds of social investigators. Although it can be argued that the Czech and Slovak states had two separate party systems all along insofar as the party organizations and electoral aspects of these lands were separated, despite the federated nature of the late Czechoslovakia, these newly developing independent states now must create autonomous electoral and party systems that will have to deal with the evolving range of issues and policies that will face each nation.

Although the historical and current development of the Czech and Slovak republics is important, this essay has sought to broach the important analytical topic of appropriate theoretical approaches for the study of the developing democratic party systems in Eastern Europe. As one can see, conceptual approaches directed at understanding party systems are not the only ones that need to be applied and fully understood to enrich the study of European politics and societies. Questions focusing on legitimacy, stability, institutionalization, etc., must be studied broadly by political scientists in the years to come.

The seminal academic work might be laid by those that want to look to the western part of the continent for techniques of analysis that enable us to gauge parliamentary democracy and its effects on various electorates and economies in Europe. With the centripetal and centrifugal forces of ideology and segmented pluralism emergent in the democratic party systems of East-Central Europe, the application of Sartori's typology seems appropriate for analyzing the causes and effects of democratic development, or the lack thereof, in polarized pluralist systems. However, when systems disintegrate, as is the case in Czechoslovakia, we may have to reorient our models and look to other conceptual frameworks. For example, Lijphart's consociational paradigm may be appropriate for understanding elite bargaining in the polarized and segmented Czechoslovak *milieu*. For now, the evolving Czech and Slovak party systems will have to be studied gradually due to the tenuous nature of democratic structures and other political and economic changes within these developing systems.

This essay has broached an important debate that must be discussed in political science if we are to gain an understanding of democratic change and development in central and eastern Europe. Insofar as western models can be applied to other central and eastern European party systems, as well as to the above two new systems, we must continue to experiment with applications and must engage in a fruitful scholarly debate of the appropriateness of conceptual analytical devices for explaining developing party systems in democratizing parts of Europe.

NOTES

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¹For thorough analyses on democratic political development and how the process affects parties and party systems, see the seminal works on the topic: Almond & Powell 1966; Huntington 1968, 1991; LaPalombara & Weiner 1966; Lipset 1960; Pye & Verba 1965; and Weiner & Huntington 1987.

²One such exception to this trend is Kitschelt's (1992) conceptual framework that seeks to apply cleavage axes to the systemic dynamics of evolving democracies in central and eastern Europe.

³The politics between Czechs and Slovaks during the Communist period are well documented. See Leff (1988).

⁴Roskin's paper (1992) is an exception to the general rule in the development of this recent debate.

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