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Political Parties and their Evolution

The previous regime cast a long shadow on the development of competitive party politics after the fall of communism. ‘Party’ evoked all the negative connotations of communist control and manipulation, especially in Central Europe. Politics was seldom equated with the art of compromise and negotiation. Yet the new institution-builders recognised the ubiquity of political parties in modern democracies and what is more, the absence of any obvious alternative. When elections became the key to political power, groups of aspiring politicians set out to mobilise the population. In the absence of a developed space between the public and private spheres, these groups bridged the gap. Politics was of necessity élite-driven. The élites both reflected and shaped the political opportunity structure. They structured the choices available to voters. This chapter analyses the types of parties that emerged in post-communist states. It examines the bases on which aspiring élites sought electoral support. It centres on the post-communist menu of choice and its evolution. It demonstrates the diversity of ways in which parties adapted to the demands of political competition.

Two criteria were traditionally adopted to generate typologies of European political parties: organisation and ideology were seen as the key to differentiating parties, understanding their internal dynamics, and explaining their change and adaptation. We referred to several of these approaches in Chapter 2. In Duverger’s argument the two dimensions of ideology and organisation were interlinked. Panebianco focused on the ways in which formative organisational development affected the process of party institutionalisation. Lipset and Rokkan were more concerned with how ideology matched the cleavage structures in society, itself shaped by critical pre-democratic conflicts. Recognisable ‘party families’ became a widespread basis for categorising political parties. Yet neither approach can offer a single criterion for identifying the range of post-communist parties. Many parties were hard to differentiate by organisational type, though in their initial stages they often resembled Duverger’s parties of notables – a sort of *faute de mieux* cadre party. New parties’ organisational capacity remained

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weak and their structural penetration limited. They found it difficult to attract and retain members, and they lacked the resources to develop as ‘electoral-professionals’. Nor were all parties ‘ideological’.

The typology presented here is based on a central criterion, the nature of a party’s electoral appeal. However, four caveats are in order. First is the problem of extracting the core appeal from what were commonly multi-pronged strategies to reach the electorate. Secondly, there are instances where categories overlap. Thirdly, party history is an implicit dimension of this typology. Parties emerged and developed in particular contexts and those that survived carried their history with them. The nature of political institutions, parties’ resources, and the character of their competitors affected the framing of their electoral appeal. None of these will be explored systematically, although they will be frequently noted in the course of our discussion. Fourthly, not all these types were present everywhere, nor were they necessarily linked to particular stages of the democratisation process.

Party types in Central and Eastern Europe

Many parties came to resemble their Western European counterparts, adopting the common philosophical underpinnings identified in Chapter 2, even though their ideological bases rarely ‘fit’ existing social or economic cleavages in these rapidly changing societies. Ideological hybrids were also common. The first category therefore is that of the ideological party. Within this category we find parties whose programmes were linked to their broad values and aspirations. We also find a distinctive group of less prevalent milieux-parties that sought to appeal to the values and interests of a specific segment of the population. Both may also be regarded as weak variants of policy-seeking parties (see Chapter 2).

But not all electoral contenders could be described as ‘parties’, and not all parties sought to base their electoral appeal on ideology. Thus we cannot use a simple dichotomy of ‘ideological’ and ‘non-ideological parties’. The non-party non-ideological contenders’ were new types of umbrella formations whose electoral appeal was closely linked to their organisational format. They established vote-seeking electoral parties or blocs, promising to deliver on valence issues of broad general concern, though without clear programme specifications. This is the second broad category in our typology. One manifestation of this type of formation was the distinctive ‘party of power’ that emerged in post-Soviet Russia and the Ukraine from within the institutions of the state. Another was the ‘new umbrella’ formation that brought existing parties together to defeat a common enemy; they were heterogeneous and unstable (see below).

Thirdly, the political scene was littered with a variety of populist parties. Indeed, one feature of the changing political scene was the frequency with which new parties emerged. In its contemporary variant, populism had no intellectual