Much of the study of post-communist politics carried with it assumptions that over time these political systems would manifest increasing stability and predictability. While ‘transition’ implied change, and with it the importance of élite actors, uncertainty, and ‘windows of opportunity’, consolidation implied that once institutions were in place they would themselves begin to shape élite behaviour. Though the ‘consolidationists’ were often careful to stress that democratic reversals remained possible, that developments were not linear, and that consolidation operated at different levels over a time span lasting up to a generation,¹ the very term ‘consolidation’ suggested that the complex elements and processes comprising a political system would somehow ‘solidify’, gradually becoming routine and institutionalised.

Many students of political parties also assumed that party development would form one aspect of this evolution.² Some observers went beyond parties per se in postulating conditions of democratic success. It was not just the development of political parties, even ‘strong’ parties, but the institutionalisation of the party system that was seen as a feature of democratic consolidation: ‘…democracy has generally thrived when party systems have been institutionalised’.³ Conversely, ‘institutionally weak party systems’ constituted an obstacle to democratic consolidation.⁴

This was not viewed as a particular problem for the new European parliamentary systems. Parties would rapidly ‘settle down’. There was reason to believe that after an initial period of chaos and fluidity, parties would see the advantages of unity for electoral purposes: ‘Too much swinging, splitting, or name changing ends up becoming a liability.’⁵ Moreover, insiders would behave as rational choice models suggested, altering the rules to make it more difficult for outsiders to break through. As economic changes progressed, clearer perceptions of ‘interests’ would emerge. Class in particular would reappear as a basis of political division.⁶ All this would simplify electoral choice, and both party identity and party identification would gradually strengthen. By extension the quality of representation would be enhanced, as voters would know what they were likely to get from
their parties and parties would have incentives to act in accordance with voters’ preferences.

Earlier chapters have already suggested that in many respects this picture does not reflect post-communist experience. This chapter investigates such expectations from the perspective of the ‘party system’. It examines the concept of the party system and assesses the extent to which we may speak of party systems and their institutionalisation in post-communist Europe. It describes the interactions of political parties rather than the individual parties discussed in Chapter 3. All countries are mentioned, though Bulgaria receives little attention: the fate of its two major political parties was extensively reviewed in Chapter 3 (and its minority party will be discussed in Chapter 9).

In Giovanni Sartori’s classic definition a party system ‘results from, and consists of, the patterned interactions of its component parts’ but is also greater than the sum of its parts.\(^7\) It is thus by definition a stable configuration, since a pattern repeats itself; but it is not static, since polities always have dynamic aspects. Unlike political parties, which have a concrete existence in the form of physical gatherings of members, the party system is not the sum of the particular parties but an analytical abstraction characterising their interactions over time.

For Sartori the pattern of competition depended primarily on the number of relevant parties, their relative strengths, and their respective ideological distance; and this has been the commonest heuristic approach to the analysis of party systems.\(^8\) Peter Mair emphasised the structure of competition as ‘the most important aspect of party systems’,\(^9\) and for him the number of parties subsided to a relatively minor position. Structures of competition may be open (unpredictable) or closed (predictable), depending on patterns of alteration in government, persistence or novelty in government formation, and the access to or exclusion of parties from government. When over time, patterns of cooperation and opposition remain relatively stable, a proliferation or reduction in the number of parties does not necessarily make much difference to the party system. By implication, without this stability over time – as in new democracies – numbers can and do matter.

The number of parties

How should we try to characterise political parties at any given time and over a given period? The number of parliamentary parties is often seen as central to the characterisation of a party system, not least because their number determines their potential interaction streams. The more fragmented they are, the more interaction streams and (probably) the more open the structure of competition. Yet it should be clear from previous chapters that in some countries one can hardly speak of regular patterns of interaction. The nature of parliamentary parties often changed considerably from one