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Comparative analysis of political transformation in East-Central European countries: Searching for general patterns

Introduction

In this work we are going to focus on political transformation processes in post-communist countries of current day Visegrad group or as it is also referred to, East-Central Europe countries, trying to answer the following question – is it possible to find a main trajectory or some general patterns of political development of these countries in comparison both with each other and why not also with other post-communist countries?

Not debating on the fact that all these countries are unique and have passed a unique path of political development they still show similar signs, rarely statistics, examples and general experiences, which motivate us to think deeper and try to find a complementary road to democratic transformation which can describe all of these countries.

So, in large aspect we are going to discuss the phenomenon of political transformation in this area of countries, and in narrow aspect we will see how the party system was formed in Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia which in our opinion is the main important feature describing the political transformation, which also touches the huge topic of political culture changes and somehow avoids the description of political systems according the types of regimes in regards of relations of different branches of power, which will be more as some kind of collection of statistics and descriptions, instead of which we will try analyzing how the power was formed and distributed in times where nobody knew yet which is the right way to go and then in times where too many people had their opinions on which is the right way to go, so how it figured and which way the countries went or who convinced others with their opinions – is the second question we shall respond to.

In this matter we will mostly rely on the brilliant work of Kostelecký with bringing on the facts he writes about regarding our question, and discuss them in comparison with other authors or the knowledge we have about these processes in subject countries.

Finding general patterns

In practice it is actually hard to draw a single trajectory of development for post-communist states both when comparing soviet to non-soviet communist states and soviet or non-soviet states between each other. As Kostelecký fairly argues: “Anyone who attempts to search for a general pattern of post-Communist development is confronted with at least two serious problems”. The first one, according to him, “consists in the fact that economic, social, demographic, and political development may not necessarily be congruent. This makes any attempt to find a ‘general pattern of development’ very complicated” (Kostelecký 2003: 38). Of course, ideally it is almost impossible to have such harmony within the states: social welfare or economic prosperity may set a good and effective ground and bring eventually to a demographic boom or to a development of political culture and its aspects, but it is more complicated, than just a linear procedure and in terms of reality it does not always follow this rule having such expected consequences. That is why, to avoid the problem of comparing the multi-sided image of transformational success for the countries that are object to our studies, authors like this, and so do we, have decided to just concentrate on the political aspects of development, otherwise being in a need to do a deeper research in other to find out and combine results from all the respective fields.

The second issue, according to the author, “consists in the fact that countries under Communist rule had been very different before the Communists came to power. Three macro-regions can be distinguished that differ substantially in terms of their historical development, religions, culture, and economic development: East-Central Europe, South-Eastern Europe, and Eastern Europe ‘proper’ (Kostelecký 2003: 39). By East-Central Europe the author means the 4 Visegrad countries of Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary and what is interesting in this area of West Slavic countries – some authors consider to include Slovenia in this group as well though Kostelecký does not do so, because even though Slovenia culturally and together Croatia also religiously, being Catholic, and economically is more close to the Visegrad countries, but because of it being a former part of Yugoslavia makes it to be an interesting case worth being studied in regard of the recent years development together with its other former companions and current neighbours of the second group under this division – the group of South-Eastern Europe or the area populated with mainly Orthodox South Slavic nations, and muslim nations like Albanians, so the picture is completely different in this part of the post-communist world, and due to the prolonged conflict in this area in terms of religious, territorial and ethnic disputes, the social and economic development as well as the political transformation is still in a far-going process and is hard to put on the same runs together with the previous group of countries. Of course the proper Eastern Europe in this case represents the area of Eastern Slavic countries, such as Ukraine and in far-going aspect also Russia and they also differ in their processes of transformation, as they were kept on the other side of the post-cold-war ruined Iron Curtain, and with the growing interests of Russian Federation as a successor of Soviet Union’s dominance

seeking traditions, the actual process of transformation should be in a certain way different than of the states situating on the other side of Soviet Union's actual border. Divisions and groupings of all of these countries can be different and more detailed, but the point will be the same in terms of them all being different from each other even within their groups (Макаренко 2008: 105). It makes our task harder in order to find some trajectories or any general way of at least political development of these countries, but still it is possible as the study of these processes shows us some similarities, or as Kostecký describes, "identifies several general trends" in the development of these countries: weak political culture and populists gaining votes, fast privatization of state ownership and emergence of oligarchs, influence of business on politics and successful participation of business-based parties on government formation and production of public officials, public position as a source of much needed power in society and as a sign of prestige or authority of the person, and so on. For East-Central Europe the author, on which he realizes his study of these processes, and which are the subjects also for our work, suggests the following ones: "increasing role of political parties in politics, the growing rationality of interest-based voting behaviour, more clearly structured political ties (the growing importance of the relationship between the social structures and political parties), and, finally, the increasing influence of the EU on their political development by helping shape their political institutions. These general trends were not observable at the same time. While the first three general features were more or less observable in the regions from the mid-nineties, the 'Europeanization' of politics in the regions quickly took off only in the first years of the new millennium with the gradual completion of the EU accession process" (Kostecký 2003: 39–40).

Rebuilding the party systems

It has been fairly noted in Kostecký's work, that although political parties are usually considered to be key institutions necessary for the long-term development of successful democratic regimes, they were not particularly popular in post-Communist countries in the early 1990s. This is not surprising given the kind of parties citizens of the observed countries had experience with. According to the author: "From the three functions political parties usually have in society – recruitment and training of future leaders, legitimizing government through the electoral contest of multiple political parties, and the translation of social conflict into political contestation – Communist parties hardly fulfilled more than the first. But even their recruitment and training of future leaders had a somewhat perverse form and gave a poor image to the political party and its personnel policies". It is obvious that some political organizations and official groups during both communist times and after were involved in a criminal state capture and were not really acting as institutions that "came into existence to serve society and its needs". On this matter Kostecký brings the following example of a pretty often happening thing when "the most unscrupulous and loyal, but at the same time professionally and managerially quite

incompetent, members of the party were promoted within the party hierarchy the quickest" (Kostelecký 2003: 40).

Regime collapsed in the hope of people to see political competition and alternatives in politics, to receive quality from that natural rivalry in the name and for the people and to have their interests fully represented by those parties as they are meant to be originally upon their creation. But, as Kostelecký argues, "the fact that the breakdown of the Communist regimes provided an opportunity for the real political competition of different parties did not improve the popular image of political parties very much. Soon, the general public adopted the view that political parties were just machines serving those seeking power and did not see much difference in whether there was one such machine or many" (Kostelecký 2003: 40). So the actual sense of trust of people towards the government and the parties struggling for power gets even more lower, people feel themselves as being lied to, real democracy seems to be an illusion since the picture is obvious to everyone of what is going on, and a huge wave of nostalgia towards the times when they at least were not being lied to, or were not aware of it is slowly coming and setting its base in people's minds. The author describes the rationale for such general distrust on political parties to be partly based on observations of reality: "While the most prominent leaders of Communist parties were stripped of power, many 'second and third tier politicians', former members of the totalitarian Party, soon appeared in public life as active members of various parties, including those on the Right" (Kostelecký 2003: 40).

Such doses of disappointment within the people actually prompts the development of civil society institutions, non-formal ones. As Kostelecký mentions, "the philosophy of 'non-political politics' became quite popular in the early 1990s, which was promoted by many former prominent dissidents who later became influential as post-Communist politicians (e.g. Václav Havel) or public opinion-makers (like Adam Michnik)" (Kostelecký 2003: 40). In such conditions, when party system fails to realize its initial responsibilities but rather slows down society from undergoing the processes of a much needed development some groups of people within the states organize alternative political unities, which aim to solve the problems of politics without acting like untrusted classic political institutions. Kostelecký introduces them as 'non-political politics', supporters of which in his opinion tended to "downplay the importance of political parties in society, claiming that parties were an outdated type of organization alienated from society and no longer served its needs. In contrast, they stressed the role of NGOs, civic associations, political movements, and civic initiatives in public life. As a consequence, political parties had to compete with many non-partisan political organizations in the first free post-Communist elections" (Kostelecký 2003: 40). In order to illustrate his point the author brings an interesting example on an "indicative sign of party unpopularity which was the fact that many political organizations that ran for office carefully avoided the word 'party' in their names". Furthermore as he continues, "regarding new organizations, among those that exceeded the five per cent legal thresholds, there were three 'Movements,' two 'Alliances,' 'Forums' and 'Unions' and one 'Action,' 'Federation,'

'Confederation,' 'Agreement,' 'Congress,' 'Trade Union' and even one 'Public'. Most of these organizations were not parties in terms of their organizational structure and membership. Only the Communist and post-Communist parties, some former satellite parties and the parties claiming to be successors of historical parties, were 'political parties' in the truest sense (the Social Democrats, Christian Democrats, Slovak National Party). The poor image of political parties worked strongly against them in early post-Communist electoral contests. The winners of the first post-Communist elections in respective countries (Civic Forum in the Czech Republic, the Public Against Violence in Slovakia, Solidarity in Poland, and the Hungarian Democratic Forum in Hungary) were not classical parties either in name or organizational structure. They were rather loosely organized umbrella movements without clearly defined membership and organizational structures" (Kostelecký 2003: 41). So the picture is clear, the image of parties was weak and populists or maybe even patriots used the opportunity to establish their own organizations and gain the popular vote by trying with their campaigns to actually transform or modify the so-called essence and nature of politics. Same can be seen farther in Caucasus, in other group of post-soviet countries. Same way as Kostelecký described it for Visegrad countries, in Armenia for example the new movement of Armenian Pan-National Movement known to be struggling for liberation of the country from the old system was just an organization of former government officials, politicians and political activists, which even though became later a party at first was the alternative organization running against the communists, becoming the sign for other traditional parties forcedly running abroad to migrate back to republic, and so it won the elections taking governmental office through which it realized the privatization reforms and captured the most part of the state ownership or sold it to foreign investors. It is just a general example of how similar people thought during those years and how they quickly organized themselves and came into power holding at first but then losing slowly the support and trust of their citizens.

But this kind of ephemeral organizations are usually not of a very long duration. On this matter Kostelecký argues, that "soon after their victorious elections, the fragile unity of these broad anti-Communist umbrella movements started to unravel. Naturally, the clashes over the direction of reforms led to the formation of more ideologically and politically distinct groups and factions, and, finally, to the split of broad movements into several different political organizations" (Kostelecký 2003: 41). When a group of people holds and practices some amounts of power, the internal division starts occurring within them regarding the concrete discourse of the policy they are following, and if the connections and ties are not really strong between the members and if the issues are too much and too hard to solve the ideological conflict does bring the intragroup opinions containing confrontations against each other and the inability to find tools that satisfy all the actors brings in the best solution to group disintegration, or at least weakens their positions in front of society and their voters. It happened also in post-communist countries, forcing the society to go into thoughts again whether this kind of organizations are efficient or are capable to deal with the serious issues states had to deal in order to continue realizing the processes of transformation. Kostelecký claims: "1990 to 1993 represents

a period in which disputes over the role of political parties between the respective supporters of political parties and 'non-political politics' became a cornerstone of political discourse in the observed countries". So, as it is said, the "outcomes of the second post-Communist elections decided not only what kind of economic reforms governments should implement, but also which type of political organization would gain greater popular support. The outcomes of these elections are easy to interpret in this respect. Political parties clearly outperformed other kinds of organizations. There are several reasons for this" (Kostecký 2003: 42).

One of the reasons, mentioned by the author, is that "In such uncertain situations many people turned to politicians with strong leadership skills. Politicians with such 'strong personalities' tended naturally to build more hierarchically structured organizations with clearly defined structures and membership to be able to control and to manage them" (Kostecký 2003: 42). This is one of the main differences in favor of parties, the lack of which existed in non-political organizations. It proved to be a strong structure and survive the so called testing of time outrunning its main competitors, and can be compared with the case of graphite and crystal where both of them are made by different formations and connections of carbon atoms, the same elements but different structures, and due to it one of them is one of the most non-solid material and the second one is one of the hardest ones in the world. It shows how organization and ties between units form the essence of things and become a determinant factor when being under consideration to be or not to be chosen. So, as Kostecký justifies, "many citizens not familiar with 'long and boring' democratic discussions over policies started to see loosely organized political movements, which usually had a collective rather than a strong personality form of leadership, as incapable of dealing with the very real and urgent problems connected with the transformation process". Because of this comparison, "parties were soon seen as more effective than movements since they were able to secure party discipline in parliamentary voting and, therefore, their political behaviour seemed to be more predictable in the eyes of voters" (Kostecký 2003: 43).

Simultaneous efforts supported by practically all political powers in the countries to build strong parliaments eventually brought to a success in formation of party systems. In cases of Visegrad countries, together with Lithuania and Slovenia this will be later called as 'successful scenario', where during the above-mentioned 2-3 cycles of elections we not only see the emergence or reformation of parties itself, but also the division of them into wings of lefts and rights. Furthermore if in the beginning of transformation parties mostly represented such general values for which they were being created, such as democracy or market and etc., later on they started to represent the interests of newly creating social classes, thus influencing the processes of social structuring of societies in their countries (Макаренко 2008: 110). Formation of party systems in Visegrad countries is itself interesting when looking at this process from a context of general pattern. First of all it is displayed in initial elections of 1990-1993, where as we know, anti-communist alliances took over, such as the Civic Forum in Czech Republic, the Public Against Violence in Slovakia and Solidarity or Polish Trade Union in Poland. But as we already discussed, contradictions soon occur between the members of these alliances in terms of general

vectors and ways of doing the reforms, so on this soil the break-aways of these alliance take place and reformations or divisions occur within both left and right wings. Former members of Communist or its satellite parties and their followers, on the left wing, consolidate not just as social-democrats, but take the position of 'national consensus', which helps them to win on second or third elections. Rights divide on two or more parties, ranging from traditional conservatists, such as Christian-nationalists – Hungarian Democratic Forum or Slovak Christian Democratic Union and etc., to newly created libertarian parties, such as Fidesz or the Young Democrats Federation in Hungary or Freedom Union in Poland and etc. Besides that parties of nationalistic character, such as eurosceptics, are being formed in some countries – Czech republicans, Slovak nationalists, and etc., in some traditional parties of a kind, such as agrarian parties, are being reborn, and in some cases, as it is for example in Czech Republic, communists as such continue to exist in political field (Макаренко 2008: 110).

Next step for these parties would be to institutionalize their presence in state's political system formation. Kostelecký gives on this following description: "when having dominated parliaments, political parties were prepared to use their political, economic and legislative power to secure accomplished positions. It was quite easy for political parties to mobilize members and supporters by providing access to economic resources and sources of power on the local and regional level. The privatization of a huge amount of state property under party control proved to be an exceptionally effective tool for parties in that respect. In a situation of 'post-revolutionary chaos' and the absence of Civil Service Codes, public administrations were very vulnerable to pressures from politicians" (Kostelecký 2003: 43). So there goes a huge second wave of people putting their trust on parties again, even though its not a trust in its clear sense but rather a hope to the product of their struggle for liberal and plural political system which was meant to ensure the establishment and practical activity of parties itself, still citizens see serious reasons not to believe what the parties were offering but just follow them because it was still the best type of political organization comparing to others existing in societies of post-communist world, just like Churchill compares democracy with other types of political regimes, when its not a pure one by its nature but is still the best one comparing to all other existing regimes, though he is also the one who says: "The best argument against democracy is a five minute talk with the average voter" (Krastev 2011: 6). Same way Kostelecký describes the situation, where in his opinion, "despite the remarkable number of privatization scandals and other financial scandals connected with political parties and their individual representatives that were discovered by the press in the 1990s, public discontent with party performance did not lead dissatisfied voters to prefer other kinds of organizations over political parties at the polls" (Kostelecký 2003: 43). So knowing and realizing this way of perception helps to those parties to find a good soil on which they can remove their other competitors from the field, which is also neatly described by the author: "later, however, parties understood that their position could also be more firmly maintained by legislative tactics that were exclusively in the hands of the most powerful parties. Through electoral reform, rules over party financing, and their control over the public media, parties

actively sought to disfavour other types of organizations as well as independent candidates in electoral contests and to prevent civic associations and NGOs from effectively participating in decision-making procedures. As a consequence, only ten years after the collapse of Communism, political parties are both very powerful and very unpopular at the same time" (Kostelecký 2003: 43–44).

It's because of this all of those important decisions on transformation processes, like how to privatize and in what extend, were taken and carried on, as there needs to be a will and a strongly built structure which stands behind these decisions. It's other question how efficient those decisions were as in the beginning of capitalist state formation in particularly all post-communist countries society bared with the problem of weak political culture and lack of experience on important decision with further implementation. 'Cartel parties', as they're being labeled by some authors, can fairly be seen or characterized as "institutions organized largely top-down, held together by the mutual economic and power interests of their membership, and rather hostile to newcomers". Still is actual the distrust topic in terms of parties, "however solid and uncontestable the position of current ones may appear", not realizing and following people's hopes, but just at the moment almost "completely having 'privatized' state institutions and public spaces and being just deeply distrusted by the public, while they may face serious challenges from other types of organizations in the near future". Consequently it is logical when the percentage of citizens not participating in elections turns out to already be very high and increasing, and "represents a major potential force that can be mobilized for better changes" (Kostelecký 2003: 44).

Conclusion

For now, even though having problems with public trust and participation, the institutional setting, and the behaviour of political elites in Visegrad countries in general is seen as pretty rational and mature as the crisis situations didn't make them to go off the path of democratic development which is an important sign speaking of their democracies and showing their ongoing consolidation.

It can be agreed upon the claim that one of the most important roles in the case of Visegrad countries was their so called 'European choice' – the strategic course of development consensual for the most part of elites and societies. Consensus upon this strategic course can be the reason why different key political powers, though still struggling for seats and debating on concrete issues regarding the programs, didn't really have any points against the basics of general policies of their countries, so these powers were not actually slowing down the process of reformation. Orientation on Europe most likely raised the role of demonstrative effect – political elites trying consciously to behave in a 'European way' or follow the standards of European policy in various public spheres or fields. Finally the 'European choice' planned a closer interaction with institutes and politicians of Western European countries, which would strengthen the western vector in politics and prompt improvements and reforms.

Coming back to initial questioning formulated in the beginning of the work if it actually is possible to have a comparative analysis of post-communist countries of Visegrad group within themselves or with other countries of the same former post-soviet vector, and if it is possible to underline general patterns of transformation of political systems of these countries, we can bring another argument in favor of the positive answer to both of these questions. During the recent 20-30 years most of the post-communist countries, in the lead of Visegrad four, seriously made their steps forward in the path of transformation – by different models, goals and success. It is the dynamism and diversity of models or approaches used in these countries, sometimes motivated by or even repeating each other, is what makes this study useful and important and even if doesn't help to find a single trajectory of development universal to all of them it still shows us the useful lessons countries got during this process with what can they use on their own.

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A Comparative Analysis of the Political Transformation in Central and East European Countries: Searching for General Patterns

Abstract

This paper focuses on political transformation processes in post-Communist countries of the current Visegrad group or as it is also referred to, Central and East European countries, trying to find similar trajectories or some general patterns of their political development in comparison both with each other and also other post-Communist countries.

Key words: Political transformation, Central and East Europe, similar trajectories, post-Communist countries