

# Stepping in the Same River Twice:

## Stability Amidst Change in Eastern European Party Competition

forthcoming in the European Journal of Political Research

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### Abstract

Party competition in Eastern Europe faces a seeming paradox. On the one hand, research finds increased political volatility in these countries. On the other hand, some authors demonstrate inherent ideological stability in the region. This research note presents a new methodological approach to adjudicating between these two findings, and suggests that while political organizations come and go, the ideological structure of party competition in eastern European is strikingly steady. We do this first by developing a number of different measures of the dimensional structure of party competition. We demonstrate the measures' consistency across countries, as well as their relative stability within countries over time. Our findings speak to current developments in eastern Europe, and have implications beyond the region. The conclusion that even volatile party systems can be underpinned by stable ideological oppositions points to two different types of party system structure: one related to parties as organizations, and one related to parties as expressions of political divides.

Key words: Political parties, party competition, Post-communism

\* The authors would like to thank Cees van der Eijk, Kevin Deegan-Krause, Tim Haughton, Liesbet Hooghe, Gary Marks, Nicolas Sauger, Hubert Tworzecki, the participants of the ECPR Joint Sessions workshop "Structures of Political Competition in Post-Communist Democracies: If Not Cleavages, Then What?" organized by Radoslaw Markowski and Ben Stanley, and two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments and suggestions. This research was supported by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet) grant 421-2012-1188, Riksbankens Jubileumsfond grant P13-1090:1, and by a public grant overseen by the French National Research Agency (ANR) as part of the "Investissements d'Avenir" program LIEPP (ANR-11-LABX-0091, ANR-11-IDEX-0005-02). All outstanding errors are ours.

## **Introduction**

The last quarter century has seen an exciting development of academic research on party competition in eastern Europe. This literature can be roughly collected into two clusters, which come to seemingly irreconcilable conclusions. The first group focuses on the formal characteristics of party systems, party organization and voting behaviour, and finds that party systems in eastern Europe are rooted in weak party organizations, associated with high levels of party births, deaths and mergers. Voters, if they bother to vote at all, keep switching between different party labels, leading to significantly higher electoral volatility. Party systems in eastern Europe are thus fundamentally fluid and unstable. The second cluster of work, however, focuses on the ideological structuration of party placements, as well as the electoral calculations of voters, and reports that “political competition in these fluid party systems is policy-based to a significant degree” (Tavits 2008b: 67). Political parties adopt stable ideological positions, and are supported by voters on the basis of their policy preferences (Whitefield 2002, see also Evans and Whitefield 1993, 1998, 2000).

How is it possible that these party systems exhibiting “extreme fluidity” (Tavits 2008a: 132) and “political noise” (Bielasiak 2005: 353), can simultaneously “contain structured social and ideological divisions. . . [that] significantly shape ideological perspectives” (Whitefield 2002: 17)? The pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Heraclitus – known for his emphasis on change and instability – famously stated that it is impossible for a person to step in the same river twice (Robinson 1990: 17, 35, 55). This metaphor is also relevant for the party politics of eastern Europe, but we emphasize a different aspect of the image. While a multitude of actors and party labels flow through the party politics of the region, this constant change takes place within stably defined riverbanks. Although the particular actors are subject

to alternation, the contours of a consistently structured party space produce an enduring shape to party competition. While it may not be possible to ‘step in the same river twice’ as the waters of party organization flow by, the structural riverbed remains stable.

In this research note, we introduce a methodological innovation that aids in understanding the stability amidst volatility of eastern European party politics. We develop a number of diverse measures to assess the dimensional structure of party competition, which depict a consistent and stable ideological framework to the party systems of eastern Europe. We demonstrate that while these measures are consistent across countries, suggesting ideological structure in the region, they also have relatively low within-country variance, which underlines their over-time stability. In short, we find evidence supporting the argument that there is ideological structure in eastern Europe, despite organizational turnover.

This research notes contributes to the study of party competition, by demonstrating diverse ways of operationalizing and measuring the dimensional structure of competition. We build from and improve on previous works thanks to three qualities of our approach: the triangulation using alternative data and measurement techniques; using publicly available data for large number of countries; and over a longer period of time. By extension, our findings contribute to research on the trade-off and tension between maximizing representation and accountability through electoral and party politics (see, e.g., Van der Eijk and Franklin 2009). Although the emergence and disappearance of parties in eastern Europe complicate electoral accountability, the enduring structure to the party space within these countries indicates that elections in the region fulfill their representational role to a greater degree than it might first appear.

## **Measuring Party Competition in Eastern Europe**

The traditional view of eastern European politics focuses on the fluidity of political organizations, and the fickle nature of eastern European voters. Both are seen as caused by the institutional and social disruptions of decades of communism which have undermined the social and organizational roots of party systems, making them fluid and open (Ost 1993, Mair 1997). These aspects of eastern European party systems have been assessed using such measures as effective number of parties (Bielasiak 2005), or electoral volatility (Birch 2003, Sikk 2005, Mainwaring and Torcal 2005, Powell and Tucker 2014). While these measures address fundamental features of the party system, they do not address the ideological structure of party competition directly.

This fluid view of the organizational and structural aspects of party politics in eastern Europe is, however, balanced by findings underlining the ideological structure of party politics in the region. These works follow Kitschelt's (1992) propositions suggesting that individual endowments and their convertibility into resources will form people's political preferences to which parties will respond. Scholars find that "political competition in these fluid party systems is policy-based to a significant degree"(Tavits 2008b: 67, see also Whitefield 2002, Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012). Parties thus represent ideological preferences of voters in structured and predictable ways. This suggests that, despite their organizational weaknesses, eastern European political systems have discernible ideological structure. This ideological structure is generally understood in terms of ideological cleavages. Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2009) assess ideological cleavages by measuring party placements on salient issue dimensions, demonstrating the relationships between key divides. Casal Bertoa (2014) measures the number, type, and strength

of electoral cleavages, concluding that what matters for party system institutionalization is the extent to which cleavages cross-cut.

In this research note, we provide novel methodological approaches for adjudicating between these two views of eastern European party competition. Building on the approach of Rohrschneider and Whitefield, and Casal Bertoa, we operationalize four diverse measures that address the ideological dimensional structure of party competition. Our approach has a number of advantages. First, it is based on publicly available quantified data, which allows researchers to study a larger number of cases, and lends itself to easy replication. Second, since our approach triangulates between a number of different measures using diverse data sources, it provides a validity and reliability check. Finally, our data is a time-series, covering multiple over-time observations from across the first two decades of the 21st century, and thus provides an important supplement to cross-sectional analyses (e.g. Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012). The following section describes our measures and provides an empirical assessment of party competition in eastern Europe.

## **Measuring Competition Structure in eastern Europe**

Party competition in eastern Europe can be meaningfully captured in a two-dimensional space spanning economic and socio-cultural issues (see Kitschelt 1992, Kitschelt 1995, Marks et al. 2006, Vachudova and Hooghe 2009). Recent work suggests that there is considerable variance in the extent to which a given eastern system competes over economic versus socio-cultural issues (Bakker et al. 2012, Rovny and Edwards 2012). Furthermore, there is some evidence that this variance is not merely arbitrary, but that it can be theoretically explained (Rovny 2014, 2015).

To evaluate the degree of consistency and stability of party competition structure in eastern Europe, this section introduces four measures related to party system stability and assesses their association. The first measure addresses the extent to which political parties compete over the economic or socio-cultural dimension, as conceptualized by the *axis of party competition*, which relates the positioning of parties on the social dimension to the positions these parties take on the economic left-right divide. Second, we assess expert uncertainty in placing parties on the economic and non-economic dimensions. We then switch to a different data source, the European Election Studies data, to examine how voter preferences on the economic and the socio-cultural dimension determine voting behavior. Finally, we return to expert survey data on party positioning and use principal factor analysis on political issue items to develop an *index of dimensional cohesiveness*, measuring the tightness of association between different political issues.

This section demonstrates two key findings. The first is the dimensional structuration in eastern Europe. Our measures show that despite variation in the role that economic versus cultural dimensions play in political competition in eastern Europe, this variance is highly consistent across our alternative measures, which indicates an underlying structure to the politics of the region. The second finding is that while these measures vary across countries, underlining diverse structure of party competition in the region, they remain relatively stable within countries over time. Taken together, these findings establish the presence of *consistent* and *temporally stable* political divides in the countries of eastern Europe. As we now introduce these alternative measures in more detail, keep in mind that while the veracity and utility of each measure for understanding various aspects of party systems is interesting, the most important feature of these measures for the present investigation is the association between them, and their relative over-time stability within countries.

## **Party Competition over the Economic and Social Dimension**

The Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) on party positioning is a long-running data generation project that asks political scientists with extensive knowledge of a European party system to place the leadership of the parties in that country on a number of dimensions and policy areas known to be of relevance for party competition in most of Europe (Hooghe et al. 2010; Bakker et al. 2015). Our first measure uses these data to address the positional relationship between the economic and non-economic dimensions of competition in eastern Europe. A two dimensional abstraction of party competition spanning economic and socio-cultural issues is common to a number of scholars of European politics (Kitschelt 1992; Laver and Hunt 1992; Kitschelt 1994; Hooghe et al. 2002; Marks et al. 2006; Kriesi et al. 2008). Parties formulate ideologies that connect their positions across these theoretically separable dimensions. We assert that parties therefore do not fall randomly on this two-dimensional space, but that the structure of party positioning can be summarized into an ‘axis of competition’ (Kitschelt 1994), which depicts the connection between party positioning on dimension  $x$  and dimension  $y$ :

$$y = \alpha + \beta x$$

Here  $\alpha$  is the intercept, while  $\beta$  represents the slope of the competition axis in the two-dimensional political space. The latter is particularly central to our analysis, because the slope outlines the relationship between the two dimensions.

Parties’ preferences on the economic left-right dimension determine the positions on the  $x$  axis. The parties’ preferences on the socio-cultural dimension determine the positions on the  $y$  axis. The steeper the slope in this two dimensional space, the greater the association between the two dimensions. This means that party placements over the two dimensions align, as parties

amalgamate their economic and socio-cultural outlooks. We use the absolute value of the weighted  $\beta$  coefficient as the first measure in our subsequent comparison of association between the other indicators. The greater this value, the steeper the axis of competition, and consequently the greater the association between the socio-cultural, and the economic dimension.<sup>1</sup> In the next section, we discuss our second indicator for the dimensional structure of eastern European party systems, which relates to expert uncertainty in the placement of party positions.

### **Expert Uncertainty on the Economic and Social Dimension**

Experts are generally better at evaluating party positions on more salient issue dimensions (Steenbergen and Marks 2007). We expect that experts will more confidently place parties on a given dimension when this dimension plays a greater role in political competition of the party system. Consequently, the (un)certainty of expert placements of parties on the economic and socio-cultural dimension, measured by the expert's standard deviations, should indicate the clarity or vagueness of competition over these dimensions. Expert standard deviations are measured at the party level in the CHES survey, and we aggregate these to arrive at a general, country-level (un)certainty over experts' party placements. We then subtract the aggregate standard deviation of non-economic placement from the aggregate standard deviation of economic placement<sup>2</sup> to arrive at a measure of dimensional uncertainty difference ( $UD$ ):

$$UD = SD_{economic} - SD_{non-economic}$$

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<sup>1</sup>Table 2 in the appendix presents the values of the weighted  $\beta$  coefficient and summarizes the values for the three other measures discussed in this sub-section as well.

<sup>2</sup>This is based on the economic left-right and gal-tan standard deviations in the CHES data.

The higher the value of  $UD$ , the more uncertain experts are on economic placements than socio-cultural placements.

### **Voting Behavior and Party Competition Structure**

Our next and third measure of party competition in eastern Europe considers voting behavior and incorporates data from the European Election Studies, supplementing the other measures derived from the CHES with an additional data source and level of analysis. In systems where the socio-cultural dimension attracts greater competitive attention, voters are more likely to consider their socio-cultural preferences, even when deciding between major political parties. Consequently, by measuring the extent to which voters consider socio-cultural versus economic issues when voting for major parties, we gain another method of assessing the structure of party competition in eastern Europe.

We produce this measure by specifying a vote-choice model. The dependent variable is vote for major left versus major right parties.<sup>3</sup> This choice is modeled as a function of economic and socio-cultural preferences, which are operationalized as factor scores combining voter positions on economic, and socio-cultural issues.<sup>4</sup> The model is estimated in each party system using logistic regression analysis, and controlling for age, gender, education and income:

$$\text{vote choice} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * \text{economic preference} + \beta_2 * \text{socio-cultural preference} + \beta_3 * \text{age} + \beta_4 * \text{gender} + \beta_5 * \text{education} + \beta_6 * \text{income}$$

This vote choice model produces estimates for the coefficients of interest,

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<sup>3</sup>See table 3 in the appendix for the list of parties considered major left and major right.

<sup>4</sup>See appendix for details about the factor analysis.

$\beta_1$  and  $\beta_2$ , in each country. Their values reflect the relative significance of economic versus socio-cultural preferences in voting behavior. To summarize the impact of economic and socio-cultural preferences by country, we produce a measure that considers the difference:  $Difference = |\beta_2| - |\beta_1|$ . The greater its value, the more predominant are socio-cultural preferences over economic preferences in voting behavior.

### **Dimensional Cohesiveness**

Our fourth and final measure investigates the compactness of political preferences and returns to the CHES data. We perform principal factor analysis on eleven policy-specific questions included in the 2006, 2010 and 2014 rounds of the survey. These items were designed to measure latent dimensions of party placement, and consist of questions about the party leadership's positions on: social lifestyle (e.g. homosexuality), the role of religion in politics, immigration policy, the trade-off between civil liberties vs. law and order, urban vs. rural interests, political decentralization to regions/localities, participation in international security and peacekeeping missions, ethnic minority rights, deregulation, redistribution, and spending and taxation.

Principal factor analysis reveals substantial variation in the cohesiveness of this latent dimension throughout the party systems of eastern Europe.<sup>5</sup> Only two factors emerge with eigenvalues greater than one in Estonia, while in many other countries as many as four factors reach this conventionally acceptable level. Yet knowing the number of factors does not provide enough information on the relative significance of the various factors in each country. In order to summarize the relative strength of the factors across the various country contexts, we develop an index that represents the cohesion of the issue items across the region. The index<sup>6</sup> sums the relative size of the

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<sup>5</sup>The results are substantively unaltered if we use rotated factor analysis.

<sup>6</sup>This index was initially developed by Rovny and Marks (2011).

eigenvalue ( $Ev_i$ ) of each of the first four principal factors<sup>7</sup>:

$$Cohesion = \sum_{i=1}^4 \left( \frac{Ev_i}{\sum_{i=1}^4 Ev_i} \right)^2$$

The closer to 1 on this index, the more cohesive the dimension. In fact a score of 1 on this index suggests that the first factor explains all the variance of the analyzed items, and the subsequent factors explain none – the dimension is totally cohesive. Table 1 in the appendix summarizes the results of the factor analyses and the values of the *cohesion index* for each country and year. To be clear, we are not advocating factor analysis as the only or even best means of examining latent structure in our data. Factor analysis can overestimate dimensionality and eigenvalues change with the number of items included (Van der Eijk and Rose 2015). Here, we merely use the factor analysis and cohesion index as one of several measures of dimensional structure. Our primary interest is in whether these diverse measures correlate with one another, which we would take as a stronger indicator of stability in the central and eastern European party space.

There are two key features of the above-discussed measures of party competition. First is that they are in fact strongly associated. Table 1 reports the pairwise correlation coefficients of the different measures for both eastern and western European party systems. In eastern Europe, all the associations are statistically significant, and most of them are rather strong ( $r > 0.4$ ). A principal component analysis of these four measures produces one factor with eigenvalue greater than one, explaining 62% of the variance. This is quite encouraging given the diverse techniques and data used to construct these measures.

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<sup>7</sup>The index considers only the first 4 principal factors because this is the highest number of factors with eigenvalues approaching 1 in our data. This avoids including factors with negative eigenvalues that may be produced by principal factor analysis (as opposed to principal component analysis).

The bottom half of Table 1 presents the same data and analysis for western Europe in order to provide a benchmark for interpretation. It demonstrates that eastern and western European party systems display rather similar characteristics, though the associations between the measures are actually somewhat weaker in the west than in the east. This latter finding – while perhaps initially surprising – is consistent with evidence presented by Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2012) that the party space of eastern European countries is actually less dimensionally complex than that of western Europe.

Table 1: Correlation of Measures

	Cohesion Index	Axis Slope Absolute	Expert Uncertainty Difference	Vote Difference
<b>East</b>				
Cohesion Index	1			
Axis Slope Absolute	0.3068*	1		
Uncertainty Difference	0.4353*	0.7000*	1	
Vote Difference	0.2801*	0.5094*	0.5810*	1
<b>West</b>				
Cohesion Index	1			
Axis Slope Absolute	0.5486*	1		
Uncertainty Difference	0.1604*	0.5020*	1	
Vote Difference	0.2035*	0.2866*	0.3579*	1

Pairwise correlation coefficients. \* $p < 0.05$

The second important feature of our four measures is that they vary more across countries than over time. Table 2 demonstrates that the between country variance is greater than the over-time, within country variance on the measures.<sup>8</sup> Although this relationship is somewhat stronger in the west,

<sup>8</sup>Please note that since our measure of Vote Difference is captured only at one time

it is consistently present in the east as well. This means that while eastern European party systems exhibit consistent differences in party competition structure – differences that are reliably described by four diverse measures using alternative data – this competition structure is relatively stable within each country over time.<sup>9</sup>

Table 2: Within and between country variance

	Within SD	Between SD	Ratio (within/between)	
Cohesion Index: East	0.075	0.087	0.857	
Cohesion Index: West	0.053	0.116	0.460	**
Axis Slope Absolute: East	0.492	0.807	0.609	*
Axis Slope Absolute: West	0.196	0.325	0.602	**
Uncertainty Difference: East	0.307	0.348	0.881	
Uncertainty Difference: West	0.310	0.213	1.459	

Note: within country variance is the variance of a score within each country over time. Between country variance is the variance between average country scores. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$

In sum, these analyses suggest that the four measures capture an internally consistent underlying measure of party competition structure in eastern Europe. Using different approaches we arrive at reliable orderings of our cases concerning the extent to which the economic or the cultural dimensions shape political competition. This ordering points to the structured nature of the ideological patterning of eastern European party competition, when viewed against the benchmark of western Europe. Furthermore, the lower within country, over-time variance demonstrates the relative temporal stability of

point, it has no within country variance, and is thus excluded here.

<sup>9</sup>The over-time (or within country) variance that we observe in our data is likely caused by various temporary or idiosyncratic effects that are beyond the scope of this paper, as well as by random measurement error.

these competition patterns. Overall these analyses emphasize that the political spaces of party competition in the region – both from the perspective of experts, as well as voters – are defined and stable.

## **Conclusion**

Just as close readings of Heraclitus indicate that the continuity present in the river image is essential to grasping the metaphor's meaning (see, e.g., Robinson 1990: 84), our research note stresses the importance of recognizing an enduring stability amidst the more immediately visible changes to the party politics of eastern Europe. We departed from a seeming paradox in the now established literature on eastern European party competition, namely that while party systems are unstable, political organizations weak and voters uncommitted, there is a significant amount of ideological structure with programmatic voting and consistent representation. The aim of the note has thus been to provide an innovative methodological approach for the reconciliation of this academic divide. Organizational instability and voter infidelity need not be synonymous with lack of structure, and by extension that electoral volatility does not necessarily undermine the representational link between voters and parties. On the contrary, we have set out to display the structural consistency of ideological patterning in eastern Europe.

While there is significant variance in the extent to which political competition occurs over economic and non-economic political issues, this variance is reliably and consistently captured through various measures using diverse data sources, and we can measure this variance in a way that is comparable to the party spaces of western Europe. This replication of relative dimensional significance across multiple measures suggests that party competition patterns in eastern Europe are meaningfully structured. Furthermore, the fact that these measures are relatively stable within countries over-time un-

derscores the temporal longevity of party competition structure in the region.

This research note thus takes some significant steps towards harmonizing the view of organizational instability and electoral volatility with ideological structure. We find that despite the fluidity of party turnover, coinciding with the necessary fickleness of voters who cannot support parties that no longer exist, the political forces that be, represent reasonably fixed political divides. This points to two important conclusions. First, there are two very different forms of structure at play in party systems. One, which is well known for its weakness in eastern Europe, relates to the organizations of political parties – their internal rules, organs, membership etc. The other one, which this note demonstrates to be stable, relates to the underlying political divides in society – the conflicts, divergent preferences, or socio-political characteristics that form the core of democratic competition.

Future research of party systems more generally should take into account the possibility that these two forms of structure are independent of one another, and that, like in eastern Europe, organizationally volatile party systems may nonetheless represent stable and abiding political oppositions. Second, our finding of structural longevity in the content of this competition, despite partisan turnover, is good news for political representation. Notwithstanding the proliferation of actors who carry it out, political representation centers on abiding political issues, and consistently serves reasonably stable political constituencies.

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