

New Political Parties in Central and Eastern Europe

**A study of the determinants
of immediate electoral suc-
cess and its consequences.**

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Research problem

The last parliamentary elections in Bulgaria (2001), Latvia (2002), Estonia (2003) and Lithuania (2004) have all witnessed a remarkable success for new parties. These parties were all formed shortly before the elections, without formal connections to any previous party, by persons who primarily were known by the electorate for activities they conducted outside party politics. All of them won the largest share of the votes or seats and all became members of coalition governments after the elections.

Immediate and large-scale success for genuinely new political parties – that is, parties with a new name and structure, not being successors of other parties and without important figures from past democratic politics among its leadership (Sikk, 2004) – is a very rare phenomenon in European politics. In more than 300 parliamentary elections in 35 European countries since World War II, only 15 new parties have reached top three and received more than ten per cent of the votes in the first parliamentary election they contested. The recent successes of *National Movement Simeon II* in Bulgaria, *Res Publica* in Estonia, *New Era* in Latvia and the *Labour*

Party in Lithuania, are matched only by *Forza Italia* in Italy in 1994.

What makes the recent development in Central and Eastern Europe even more remarkable is firstly the fact that these new parties do not represent any new ideological position. In contrast they either clearly position themselves within established categories such as conservatives or liberals or flatly refuse to place themselves ideologically at all. Secondly, they neither exploit issues, such as environment, immigration or EU-membership, which has been a common recipe for the success of new parties in general, nor regional or ethnic cleavages.

On the contrary, these new parties are very similar to the established parliamentary parties in the region, focusing on roughly the same issues – primarily socio-economics – as the other mainstream parties, trying to reach the broad segments of the electorate, rather than specific groups. What seems to define these new parties more than anything else is their focus on anti-corruption, ethics and honesty in politics, and novelty *per se*. Promises of better *quality* of both the procedures and outcome of the policy-making process, rather than alternative policies, seem to have struck a chord in the minds of the electorate.

Aim of the research project

The aim of this study is twofold. Empirically the study aims to explain the immediate electoral success of this new type of parties in Central and Eastern Europe and analyse its consequences in terms of policy outcome and regime support. Theoretically, this study will hopefully contribute to two different strands of literature. Firstly, by studying a new type of parties

the project aims at filling a gap in the literature on the success of new parties. Secondly, by studying these parties' governmental performances, the project will also contribute to the understanding of democratic legitimacy and regime stability.

Previous research on the electoral success of new parties

Immediate electoral success of new parties is related to the research on party system stability. While the research on party system is abundant (concerning Central and Eastern Europe in particular see, Lewis, 2000; 2001; Kostelecky, 2002; Rose & Munro, 2003), there is still very limited research on the particular topic of concern for this study. Most studies are either quite general in character, merely discussing the preconditions facilitating the emergence of new parties (Lucardie, 2000), or very detailed ones, analysing the success of a particular party in a single election (Davis & Ozolins, 2004; Harper, 2003; Taagepera, 2004). In addition there are studies on the success on single issue parties, such as xenophobic, anti-immigration parties (Taggart, 1996; Abide, 2004), whose ascent primarily is attributed to the novelty of that particular issue. Research on the development of the party systems in Central and Eastern Europe has primarily focused on describing the process and less on explaining particular outcomes (Lewis, 2000; 2001).

Party system stability is generally analysed on the basis of supply and demand, i.e. the interaction between the availability of parties (supply) and the extent to which they satisfy the popular demands (Rose & Munro, 2003:9). New parties will be encouraged to emerge in a context when the

established parties are neglecting changes in the popular demand (Ibid p. 74), which for example would explain the success of the Green parties in the 1970s and 1980s and of the populist and anti-immigration parties in the 1980s and 1990s (Taggart, 1996; Abide, 2004). In contrast to what theories of institutionalisation would predict – and what other scholars have claimed (Bakke & Sitter, 2005; Lewis, 2000; 2001) the party systems in Central and Eastern Europe are still 'floating', i.e. having a high supply of parties, which hampers the voters incentives to stabilise their preferences (Rose & Munro, 2003:68). Thus, immediate electoral success of new parties comes as no surprise. Rose & Munro are however unable to explain why new parties have been successful in just some of the countries and not in others. The indicators on party stability are moreover pointing in very different directions in the four countries concerned in this study.

The institutional framework, most importantly the electoral system, but also the party financing and registration systems, affects the incentive structure for new parties to emerge in the first place, however (Rose & Munro, 2003:9; Lucardie, 2000:179; Sikk, 2004). If the barriers for entering the political arena are high, the established parties will be considered to be the only available path to a political career, thereby reducing the supply of parties in the election, while a system with low barriers will encourage political freelancers to try their fortune and start a new party, thereby increasing the options for the electorate.

The strategy of the new party is essential for its success rate (Bakke & Sitter, 2005). They must have a "convincing political project, which addresses social problems considered urgent by significant

numbers of voters” (Lucardie 2000:176). Another facilitating condition for the emergence of new parties is political and economic upheavals such as leadership crisis, surging unemployment and inflation etc (Lucardie 2000:179).

The demand side focuses on the voters’ attitudes and behaviour. The type of demand – e.g. new policy issues or ideological shifts – affects the type of new parties to emerge (Lucardie, 2000). Other demand-driven factors behind party system instability more generally are declining party identification or decreasing trust in political institutions.

Design and research method

This study will focus primarily on those parties that have been the most successful and which share the characteristics discussed above, namely Res Publica, New Era, Labour Party and NDSV. In order to explain the success of these parties it should however be necessary in the comparative study to expand the number of cases to countries in Eastern Europe where new parties did not emerge or were much less successful (cf. Hug, 2000).

In this project the immediate electoral success of new successful parties in Eastern Europe are treated both as a dependent and an independent variable. As a dependent variable the phenomenon will be analysed from four perspectives: an institutional, a party-centred, a structural and a voter perspective. These perspectives will be utilized in an integrative model in order to identify the different incentive-structures for new parties to appear and be successful. The institutional framework consists of a set of formal and informal rules, which facilitates or hampers the possibility for new parties to emerge in the first

place and are thus factors beyond the influence of the new parties. The same is true for the structural perspective, which relates to the broader political and economic development in society and which most likely have an influence on how voters perceive the performance of the government. The party-centred perspective relates to the relationship between the new parties and the electorate on the one hand and between the new parties and the established ones on the other hand and focuses on the new parties’ political programme, their position on certain issues, compared to the established parties’, and their activities towards the electorate. The voter perspective finally relates to the perception of the electorate of the economic and political situation in the country more generally, as well as their view on how the parties – established and new – are able to handle the situation. Moreover the more general trends in electoral volatility and party identification are included in this perspective.

Studying the phenomenon as an independent variable the focus will be on the consequences of the actual policies pursued by the governments, in which those new parties have played important roles, i.e. to what extent they have kept their pledges and improved the situation in their prioritised areas.

Even more interesting perhaps is the voters’ opinion on the governments’ performances and how their attitudes are channelled behaviourally. In case of good performance it is a fair guess that the new parties will remain popular and perhaps even remain in office, which is quite unusual in the post-communist countries. If however also the new parties fail to deliver and/or are bogged down in corruption scandals etc. there are good reasons to be worried. It is reasonable to assume that

the success of the new parties are connected to some kind of popular dissatisfaction with the established parties, which have alternated in office during the first ten years of the post-communist era, without – in the eyes of the public – improving the situation of ordinary people. One could thus view the success of the new parties as a last resort for desperate voters who badly want a change and in case even these parties are found not to be any different from their predecessors, the trust for important state institutions and support for the democratic system will most likely suffer. A decreasing legitimacy for the democratic system is a potentially very dangerous situation. One could at this stage only speculate over the next step in such a process when disillusioned voters go to the ballot next time. It does not seem too farfetched to assume that more radical alternatives could be waiting in the wings. Studying the outcome of the new parties' governmental performance can, thus, contribute to our understanding of the factors behind democratic legitimacy and its consequences.

The methodological approach is comparative in the sense that the same model will be applied on the countries involved, which is not to say that the phenomenon under study is caused by the same factors or that the factors have the same weight in all countries. Rather the model allow for the emphasis on different factors as the most important in different countries.

The empirical study will combine quantitative and qualitative data. The former consists of existing databases with survey data on voter opinions. If needed a smaller inquiry survey will complement these data. The qualitative data consist of party manifestos and other types of electoral campaign material and interviews with

leading figures in established and the new parties.

Preliminary results

A preliminary analysis of some of the most intriguing factors for explaining the immediate electoral success of new parties has been undertaken including the former and current applicant states in Central and Eastern Europe. The preliminary results show that:

- *Institutional* factors – electoral system, parliamentary / presidential system, party financing rules – are not sufficient to explain the different outcomes in the region. New parties have been successful in both PR and mixed systems, while many countries with PR have not experienced successful new parties; neither can financial resources be a sufficient condition to be successful in elections. New Era, for example, managed well with very limited electoral spending (Sikk, 2004:9).
- *Structural* factors have a mixed impact. Decline or slow economic growth does not correlate with the success of new parties. On the contrary they have been successful in times of rapid economic growth. When looking at the countries GDP/capita one would expect the citizens of the poorer countries to be the most prone to turn to new alternatives. That indicator seems to be strongly correlated with new parties being electorally successful. The six countries, in which new parties have been successful are in fact the very poorest ones among the EU-members and current applicants, save Romania and Turkey. Unemployment rate is also correlated with the success of new parties. In the Baltic States and Bulgaria the unemployment rate has

been decreasing markedly during the last couple of years, but they are still on a higher level than Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovenia, which are the best performing countries in Central Europe in this respect (EBRD, Annual reports). It thus seems that most of the new parties have emerged in times of improvements on the indicators discussed above, rather than in times of downturns. When measuring levels rather than direction (on some of the indicators at least), it appears however that the new parties have emerged in the worse off countries, which indicate that people do not consider the improvements good enough and/or still find themselves no better off than before.

- New parties have been successful in countries with a high level of *corruption* (Latvia at 57th) as well as in countries with relatively low level of corruption (Estonia). In Bulgaria, Latvia and Lithuania, the new parties emerged while the countries were improving their Corruption Perception Score. Measured this way, the actual corruption level in society per se does thus not seem to have an effect on the success of these new parties. (Transparency International).

Persons involved

Li Bennich-Björkman has conducted empirical fieldwork in the Baltic states since 1998. This research has to a large extent built on an extensive number of elite-oriented interviews (125-150) and she has developed a thorough knowledge about elite interviewing. Li Bennich-Björkman has many academic and political contacts in the Baltic states and has a close cooperation with the departments of political sci-

ence at University of Latvia (contact persons: Zaneta Ozolina, Daina Bara, Andris Runcis) and Kaunas Technological University (contact persons: Irmina Matonyté, Algis Krupavicius).

Andreas Bågenholm is currently finishing his dissertation at Göteborg University on the adaptation of EU legislation in Lithuania and Romania, which has involved field work in those countries. The work is planned to be finished in 2005. Andreas Bågenholm has been writing and teaching on East European political development for the last ten years. He is a lecturer at the Centre for Russian and East European Studies and at the Department of Political Science, Göteborg University.

Andreas Johansson is currently writing on a dissertation in which he develops a normative theory on multiculturalism and democracy. The thesis is planned to be finished in the spring of 2006. Andreas Johansson is a lecturer at the Centre for Russian and East European Studies at Göteborg University and has written several chapters and papers on the post-communist developments in Central and Eastern Europe, in particular on the relation between democratisation and nationalism and identity politics.

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