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(Shallow) Europeanization and Party
System Instability in Post-Communist
States:

**How Changing Constraints Undermine the
Development of Stable Partisan Linkages**

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(Shallow) Europeanization and Party System Instability
in Post-Communist States:
How Changing Constraints Undermine the Development of
Stable Partisan Linkages*

Robert Ladrech

The European Union (EU) has had a profound effect upon the democratizing countries of post-communist Central and Eastern Europe. Indeed, the specific direction of their political-economic development as well as social welfare provision has been inextricably tied to the decision to join the EU, and subsequent efforts to ‘download’ the EU’s *acquis communautaire* have imparted a liberal conception of state-society relations. In the realm of politics in particular, the EU has also had a significant effect, primarily through the terms of its political conditionality. In the end, the overwhelming desire by most political elites in post-communist countries to gain membership in the EU, as soon as possible, acted as a form of self-discipline for these governments to meet the conditions the EU set for membership. In the process, minority rights were protected and strengthened, elections were monitored for their fairness, and in some cases, such as that of Slovakia at the end of the 1990s, the EU may have been a critical factor in preventing a return to authoritarian government. More specifically, in the case of political parties, the *indirect* influence of the EU can be ascertained in various domains, for example in national party

* This paper was first presented in September 2008 in Sofia, Bulgaria, as part of the research project led by Prof. Paul G. Lewis (Open University) on ‘Emerging Party Systems in Europe’, funded by the British Academy.

finance legislation designed to counter potential corruption, in campaign technique and party organizational development through relations with respective transnational party federations, and in the pattern of party system competition that emerged due to the marked support for eurosceptic parties, a phenomenon especially notable from the late 1990s onward. In general, mostly positive attributes have been associated with the influence of the EU on the political development of post-communist countries, especially those that chose to apply for eventual EU membership. On the other hand, closer scrutiny of political dynamics in these countries reveals a slightly more complex and perhaps mixed picture; that is, after nearly twenty years since the process of democratization began, there are certain indicators that point to continuing instability, especially in regard to the degree of party system institutionalization (psi), suggesting that these party systems have not (yet) acquired the full characteristics of western European party systems. The main question this chapter confronts is whether the EU can be implicated in this partial failure of the party systems to reach levels of stability that approximates those in Western Europe.

This chapter argues that the EU has been a contributing factor in the inability of CEE party systems in general, to acquire the attributes of an institutionalized party system. However, it will be argued that the EU effect upon CEE party systems has not been static, that it has changed over time, and that it is based on the perception by CEE party elites of the effectiveness of EU-induced constraints on their behaviour. This analysis therefore fits into the emerging party Europeanization literature (see Ladrech 2009 for an overview) as well as the literature on party system development in post-communist political systems (e.g. Lewis 2006). On the one hand, the party Europeanization approach is concerned with determining whether the EU can be isolated as a causal factor in domestic change. On the other hand, party system analysis tries to

explain why, after nearly twenty years since the end of the previous regime, CEE party systems continue to exhibit relatively high levels of electoral volatility and party fragmentation. This chapter attempts to bridge these two different approaches by presenting an external or international factor into post-communist party system analysis as well as add to the present body of Europeanization studies in the area of party change. The thesis advanced in this chapter is as follows: the party elites of most of the main parties of government that emerged by the mid-1990s signaled their strong desire to join the EU as soon as possible. This goal was shared by the party leaderships of both the (putative) centre-left and centre-right, and produced an almost immediate consequence: the displacement of socio-economic partisan conflict or cleavage between them by political-cultural issues. In other words, by collaborating on the main outlines of their emerging socio-economic systems in the process of adapting to the EU's *acquis communautaire*, which had the effect of significantly influencing relations between state and economy, in particular the emphasis on competitiveness and a de-emphasis on state aid, the main parties of government removed this dimension of policy as an area of competition, thereby allowing parties to their far left or far right as well as political entrepreneurs, i.e. new parties, to exploit this lacuna in left-right political competition. However, this seemingly self-imposed conformity lessened the more confident party leaderships became that the goal of membership was a certainty – after the announcement in 2000 of those countries with which the European Commission would begin official accession negotiations, and after membership itself, i.e. post-2004. The effect of weakening conformity on the socio-economic policy dimension was to allow party leaderships to re-package their parties' electoral appeal, including the introduction of a more nationalist discourse. This process of changing party policy profiles over the period of the mid-1990s to the present has had the result, it is argued, of preventing the

development of stable linkages between voters and these parties, and thereby explaining a portion of the continuing low levels of party system institutionalization in CEE countries. In terms of party Europeanization findings, this chapter contributes further evidence of the differential outcomes of the Europeanization process, in this case between the older party systems in western European and those of the post-communist member states.

Theoretical and Contextual Background

The literature that has developed concerning party system institutionalization in Third Wave democracies, with much of the initial assumptions developed by Mainwaring and others (*inter alia*, Mainwaring and Torcal 2006), does not incorporate external, that is, international, variables into their research questions. Although international actors do of course play a role in issues related to political stability in areas such as Latin America – one can easily bring to mind the IMF, the USA, and programmes such as NAFTA, none of these external actors approach the fundamental influence of the EU in the political developments that have unfolded since the transition phase in post-communist eastern and central Europe. To be specific, I am not recalling the efforts of external actors in the transition to democracy *per se*, rather, the extent to which they contribute to the stabilization of the party system according to the criteria put forward by Mainwaring et al. There is a clear case to be made, and it has been articulated by a number of commentators, that the EU's political conditionality played a critical role – the degree to which is debatable – to the stabilization of democratic practice. The question this paper focuses upon is then more precise: has the EU been a factor in the persistence of low levels of party system institutionalization in post-communist states, both pre- and post-accession? This paper argues in the affirmative, and explains the contribution made by

the EU to this ‘condition’ by focusing on a hypothesized incongruence between policy preferences pursued by party elites and those of voters. The components of the argument are: *first*, the decision to obtain EU membership as soon as possible, by most parties, and especially by nominally centre-left and centre-right parties, locked-in a policy direction in terms of socio-economic choices that had direct consequences for party competition; *second*, the nature of party competition by government and main challenger parties therefore emphasized political-cultural over economic choices – as the space for policy innovation was circumscribed by EU *acquis communautaire* - but economic choices in euro-sceptical tones by ‘extreme parties’ were also on offer; *third*, EU political conditionality further exerted policy conformity on governmental parties; *fourth*, opportunities for new party formation were generated by the policy space left ‘vacant’ by the main parties; *fifth*, the constraints on major parties on socio-economic issues begin to decrease the closer to accession; and finally, *sixth*, the preceding points are predicated on party elite manipulation of party policy positions. The result of this evolving state of affairs was to prevent rapid voter loyalty/partisan identification because major parties continued to ‘sample’ policies as conditions altered, that is, as EU constraints lessened, these parties produced new policy profiles in order to capture a larger portion of the electoral market. As Tavits (2008a) suggests, ‘[g]iven this continuous adaptation by elites and voters, it is not surprising that instability in this region has been sustained for more than 15 years’ (67). The contention of this paper is that strategic elite behaviour was at least partly influenced by the desire to join the EU, and as political conditionality (i.e. constraints) decreased the closer accession neared, and especially in the post-accession period, party elite behaviour reverted to more unhindered office-seeking strategies. The paper elaborates these points in more detail.

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The transition from Communist one-party, command economies to one characterized fundamentally by a market economy and political pluralism has no immediate antecedent. The literature specifically dealing with the establishment and consolidation of democratic political systems outside of Europe acknowledges the sometime critical support of international actors, especially in the consolidation phase of a fragile political system. Within a European context, as for instance in the cases of Spain and Portugal, the desire by certain elites to insure stability of their post-authoritarian regimes involved EC and NATO membership (EC membership in particular for reasons of economic and structural modernization). But a fundamental difference between the Spanish and Portuguese cases and those of post-communist countries is the formers' possession of a market economy (no matter the degree of isolation from the wider international capitalist system) and ideological positioning of new and reformed parties that allowed relatively rapid voter alignment with these parties. In the case of parties emerging in post-communist systems, transition and consolidation involved both a shift toward a market mechanisms (with all of the implications deriving from the methods pursued, e.g. so-called 'shock therapy') and initial voter alignments based on the position of parties relative to the previous regime, i.e. anti-Communist opponents, etc., not left-right ideological polarization or social cleavage representation. It is this context that made the decision to attempt EU membership as soon as possible so fateful. At the time of official pronouncements by these governments that joining the EU was a fundamental, national interest goal, the parties and party systems were characterized by weak cleavage structures with which to support party systems (Mair 1997); weak programmatic identities (Kitschelt 1995); and parliamentary-elite dominated party organization; and electoral volatility between elections, together with parties appearing and disappearing after only one or two elections. This set of characteristics describe the condition of parties and party systems

during the first decade of post-communist competitive party systems, but what explains the persistence of electoral volatility (see Webb and White (2007)) for additional indicators)? The party system institutionalization expectation is that there ought to have appeared a trend towards stability in terms of more predictable behaviour of voters toward parties, and this has not occurred widely enough to be taken as a rule. Electoral rather than partisan mobilization characterized early mobilization, with the price paid being weak linkages between party and voters (Van Biezen 2003). Although Kitschelt et al. (1999) found evidence of programmatic crystallization, social protectionist vs. market liberalization, the parameters within which these two mainstream components of the party system actually differed, once commitment to EU membership became the norm for both, was minimized (though not neutralized).¹ Attachment to EU membership by all major parties further lessened macro-economic distinctions, thereby putting a premium on other factors, including leadership qualities of party elites and factors pertinent to individual country-cases. Another effect, also slowing psi, may be the less efficient representation of social cleavages, a prime function of parties as they developed in western European party systems. McAllister and White (2007) suggest that although much progress has been made, there remains a notable difference between voters' positions on the left-right scale and that of parties in emerging democracies than in established ones.

It has been asserted that one result of the Europeanization of western European party systems is a reduction in competition – a narrowing of competitive space - in the realm of economic policies, as the room for manoeuvre by member state governments is circumscribed by membership in the euro-zone – with the consequent inability to

¹ It should be noted that the research for *Post-communist Party Systems: Competition, Representation, and Inter-Party Cooperation* took place in 1993 and 1994, and this paper focuses on party changes beginning at

manipulate interest rates; limits on budget deficits; and less overt interventionist policies due to constraints on state aid; etc. Ladrech (2002) and Mair (2006) have argued that the narrow policy space has a consequent indirect effect on parties' positions in competitive elections, with Mair (2007) also suggesting that the effect leads to a 'de-politicization' over time. The contrast with post-communist experiences is stark. The intensity or impact of accommodating the *acquis communautaire* for already existing liberal democratic-market economies was slight compared to that of the post-communist member states, for whom downloading of the *acquis* was a condition of membership. Additionally, in the west, prospective members could negotiate and upload preferences to the EU. This was the case, for example, from the 1986 enlargement incorporating Spain and Portugal to the 1995 enlargement that included Finland, Sweden and Austria. In the east, Commission monitoring and accession conditionality – which were *not* part of the older states' experience - ensured an adaptation 'from above'. Deeply embedded domestic structures in the west could resist or shape EU directives whilst eastern counterparts, still weakly structured, were less resistant. If domestic change related to the influence of the EU (i.e. europeanization) in the west was deemed to be 'accommodation' or 'adaptation', in the east 'transformation' better qualified the set of outcomes (Börzel 2005). Thus if the EU has had an effect at all on western parties through an indirect process of internalizing EU single market norms and regulations at the level of government, the much more 'directed (some would call it coercive) process of rule transfer' (Borzel 2006: 164) in post-communist countries would suggest a definite impact on parties. But in exactly what manner could the EU impact new parties in post-communist states?

From the mid-1990s, post-communist governments in most eastern and central European countries made clear their intention of gaining membership in the EU. In 2000

the end of this period.

the EU indicated which states would begin formal accession negotiations, but the handful of years prior to this date saw governments strive to position themselves to be 'acceptable' to the Commission – the political and electoral changes in Slovakia are seen by some as but one example of the influence exerted by the domestic desire to make the 'cut'. The clearly pro-EU parties, which included the major centre-right and centre-left parties in most cases, were obliged to signal their acceptance of the main thrusts of EU development to date, this being encapsulated by the *acquis communautaire*. By signalling acceptance of this blueprint for their evolving political economies, and further, forming cross-parliamentary party pacts to speed the necessary legislation through their respective national parliaments, these parties took potential socio-economic policy differences between them off the competitive political spectrum. The desire to join, which was largely enjoyed by these party elites and a majority of the public, temporarily deflected scrutiny of this economic policy convergence expedience. For some, this 'de-politicisation' could have negative consequences, for example 'arresting party developments by excluding from political competition those substantive, grass-roots, ideological policy conflicts around which western European party systems have evolved' (Innes 2002: 101-102). One could also add that, in addition to conditionality 'locking-in' the macro-economic policy direction and thus reducing the policy space between main parties, most of these parties also took advantage of the assistance offered by western-based transnational party federations to shape party policy and ideology. Affiliation with these so-called euro-parties, such as the Party of European Socialists and the European People's Party, was seen as an extra resource to develop networks and gain advice on compatible European political behaviour (Lewis 2005; Pridham 2005). Spirova (2008) argues that legitimacy 'derived from the EU level was so important that parties chose strategies that might not have been entirely to their benefit in terms of office-seeking

ambitions, but that satisfied the will of the Europarties' (805). The point here is that party elites had to combine two fundamental goals, portraying their parties and by extension, governments, as appropriate potential members of the EU, *and* get elected, that is, attract voters. Put into principal-agent terminology, these party elites served two principals.² Their primary attraction to voters in the late 1990s, but wearing off in the early 2000s, was their fundamental support for the 'return to Europe' sentiment. The EU, in particular the Commission, was the other actor requiring a demonstration of their conformity to EU norms and political behaviour in addition to policy and institutional development, through the publication of continual progress reports. Two consequences for party systems emerged from this situation, an accent on political-cultural factors in party competition and a space, small at first, for euro-sceptic parties at the extreme ends of the party system.

With major left vs. right conflict over economic direction minimized once EU membership became the overarching aim, political-cultural issues came to play a perhaps larger role in party competition than might have been the case. Personality issues, attesting to the weakness of party organizational roots in society, also emerged as factors in electioneering. Historical grievances, ethnic division, relations with the previous regime, etc, all combined to become issues upon which major parties were obliged to invest time and effort. With macro-economic issues displaced during the mid-to-late 1990s, the policy space was filled with alternative issues. Secondly, parties that contested the drive for EU membership, including some old regime parties such as the Czech KSCM or right-wing nationalist parties such as the Hungarian Miep, were able to tap into euro-sceptic sentiment and challenge the economic policy compact between the main parties. Marks et al. (2006) refer to these parties according to their placement on two

² This argument therefore complicates the picture presented by Lane and Ersson (2007).

axes, left and right representing the economic dimension, and a political dimension, portrayed as *gal* (green, alternative, libertarian) and *tan* (traditional, authoritarian, nationalist). Interestingly, the major opposition to the EU in the 1990s was from left-*tan* parties such as KSCM. These parties were able to exploit the decision not to challenge some of the basic economic policy fundamentals of the EU, especially those aspects of liberalizing economies. In this respect they represented a ‘left’ position but also incorporated features of the *tan* categorization, namely ‘nationalist’. Yet, at least in the early-to-mid 1990s, widespread euro-sceptic opinion was relatively low. As the decade progressed, and especially after formal accession negotiations began in 2000, euro-sceptic sentiment expanded, at least the so-called ‘soft’ euro-scepticism. The electoral fortune of some left-*tan* parties improved but equally significant was the emergence of rhetoric in some mainstream parties mildly critical of the EU such as the Czech ODS and the Polish PiS (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2004).

Both of these factors, mainstream party aversion to clear differences over economic policy allowing greater salience to political-cultural issues, and the ability of left-*tan* parties to challenge EU economic policy in the name of the ‘losers’ of the transition to market economies created a competitive policy spectrum that ill-served a segment of the electorate, that is, those politically pro-EU but wary of some aspects of EU-mandated economic change and the resulting effects on social welfare (in the west, this is represented by a portion of the social democratic electorate and party activists). Recognizing that there are a variety of euro-sceptic positions (as witnessed not least by different classifications on offer; see Kopecky and Mudde 2002; and special issue of *Acta Politica* 2007) that a party system divided into a basic pro- and anti-EU does not capture, it is not difficult to see that there was a policy vacuum from the mid-1990s onwards. The difference between western and eastern party systems is the much more clearly defined

line of accountability between the EU's policy orientation and domestic government economic policy in post-communist countries. In the west, political parties that are generally pro-EU – which is essentially most mainstream parties – have a) policy stances developed well before the onset of a more policy intrusive EU (post-Single European Act, 1986), and b) have been able to maintain policy autonomy in their public profile through the marginalizing of the EU in daily political life. The opposite is true for most post-communist parties, and therefore the impact of the EU can more directly be linked to policy change among parties.

This brings the argument to its next stage, that is, new party formation. In an environment in which the 'pull' of EU membership created policy vacuums for voter preferences, this impacts strategic entry calculations by new parties. Many parties that entered and then disappeared one or two elections later may have been able to enter in the first place because of where they positioned themselves vis-à-vis existing parties and the manner in which they were able to manipulate or politicize an issue (Tavits 2008a). More specifically for the present argument, it is assumed that beginning in the late 1990s and continuing up to at least accession in 2004, a defining aspect of the policy profile of some challenger parties may be to position themselves where the hypothesized policy vacuum exists, that is between general support for EU membership but critical stances vis-à-vis economic policy issues, what Marks et al. might label *left-gal*. Vachudova (2008) underlines this indirectly by stating that based on the 'content of the requirements for EU membership, we know that the EU expects parties in the East to take positions that tend toward the *right* and toward *gal*' (862). However, parties to the right of the *right-gal*, that is, parties for whom EU membership stimulates a nationalist backlash and are not linked with former regime, what Marks et al. could label *right-tan*, also position themselves for stealing voters from the main centre-right parties. Both of these dimensions of party

competition are small areas, but nevertheless, if voter volatility and the number of parties are indicators of psi, then they should not be dismissed. Their brief lifespan, again underlining the psi nature of the argument, is explained in the final stage of this chapter's argument.

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To recap the argument so far: from the mid-1990s onwards, most 'mainstream' parties in post-communist states signalled their intention to become members of the EU as soon as possible. Most of these parties had political credentials based on their role in the transition from the old regime. In addition, most had also supported a transition to a market economy, although in the early 1990s the routes to this goal varied among the new governments. Once these party/coalition governments made their EU decision, the outline of their macro-economic policy direction became EU-directed, thereby removing from party competition the space for differences over the type or mix of economic and related policies. This indirect effect of the EU, self-induced, is the factor that this chapter argues contributed to the shape of party systems from the mid-1990s up to accession in 2004, for it allowed anti-EU parties, small at first, to exploit the reticence of major parties to take more nationalist or 'soft' left stances in pre-accession negotiations. It also made the party system environment more conducive for new parties to position themselves in such policy proximity to these major parties so as to 'steal voters'. The next stage of the argument is as follows: the constraint on pro-EU parties on economic policy differentiation and on 'soft' nationalist positions, begins to ebb or decrease after formal negotiations open in 2000 and accelerate after accession in 2004. The decrease in perceived constraints is by no means an indication that *all* parties begin to adapt their ideological profiles to the altered environment, simply that the *conditions* are such that

party leaderships may take advantage to pursue more unhindered vote-maximizing strategies.

A basic premise of this argument is that pro-EU party elites had as a major goal for their country the successful and speedy entry into EU membership. Once this became a possibility – mid-1990s to 2000 – party/government leaderships strenuously portrayed themselves to the EU as politically and in economic policy terms as compatible with EU norms and policy orientations. In domestic party competition, sometimes major parties promoted themselves as better able to steer their country toward EU membership. This is a rationalist, if not rational institutionalist perspective, and fits in with the thrust of europeanization studies of post-communist states (Sedelmeier 2006). Agh (2003) refers to this as ‘anticipatory europeanization’. Once certain countries made the initial ‘cut’ (all but Bulgaria and Romania), the critical EU-related question was now *when* membership would be achieved rather than *if*, and this state of affairs represents the initial decrease in externally generated constraints, although this is a domestic leadership perception rather than an easing of conditionality or surveillance on the transposition of the *acquis communautaire* by the European Commission. This explanation, of a reaction or interpretation by party leaderships of an altered environment, also fits into the europeanization research paradigm, though here a constructivist approach is invoked to explain how party leaders may weigh the costs and benefits to themselves in a competitive situation. After accession in 2004, a further reduction in perceived constraints could be expected to lead to a) new coalition possibilities, and b) nuanced shifts in pro-EU positions. Empirical evidence seems to support, in the realm of party politics, the hypothesis of a ‘shallow europeanization’. As Goertz (2005) suggests, rationalist arguments suggesting a ‘pattern of wide-ranging, but relatively shallow, effects are underscored by more constructivist understandings of Europeanization, which stress

the importance of learning and socialization and note that institutions are not just constructed around interests, but norms and values' (262). The top-down nature of EU political conditionality and the underdevelopment of societal agents pushing for integration, 'did not leave much room for socialization through processes of social learning and policy emulation. Moreover, it undermined the overall legitimacy of Europeanization since the candidate countries had no say in the creation of the rules that they were expected to adopt and the EU required them to comply with rules that did not apply to the old member states. . . With sociological mechanisms being largely absent, we should not be too surprised to find 'shallow Europeanization . . .' (Börzel 2006: 166). The result of less time and 'outsider' status in relation to EU actors and institutions meant that with 'shallow institutionalization, fluidity and uncertainty . . . strategic interest-based "rational" behaviour by domestic actors is more likely . . . (262). Applied to the strategic calculations of party leaders in government or aspiring to government, placating and convincing the EU of their suitability or readiness in the latter half of the 1990s demanded conformity; achievement of formal accession in 2004 removes or greatly decreases the constraint over behaviour, and it could be expected that options which could not be pursued before, for example in terms of acceptable coalition partners or more soft euro-sceptic rhetoric to target more voters, would increase as each individual party system demanded. The Europeanization argument thus retains the understanding of a differential response to the end of the self-perceived constraint on political strategic considerations, and helps therefore to explain the lack of a convergence among parties. This argument corresponds in general with that of Vachudova (2008) who argues that a weakening of conditionality witnesses ideological re-positioning of certain types of parties. The argument presented here consequently adds to an actor-centred analysis of these changes with some pre-suppositions regarding party leadership behaviour.

The argument above is based on an understanding of most post-communist parties internal organization, especially those created after the end of the previous regime, where party leaderships are mostly unhindered by the membership (the party on the ground), extra-parliamentary party officials (the party in central office), or by affiliated organizations. Of course the reason for this dominance is the underdevelopment of all three areas of party life. In other words, the dominant segment of parties, the party in public office (Van Biezen 2003; Mair 1997), is relatively autonomous in setting out changes whether in government or the opposition that reflect perceived opportunities for electoral mobilization. This relative autonomy facilitates changes in rhetoric, tactical moves regarding coalition partners, or expressed policy positions. The opportunity to exercise this degree of maneuverability expands as the external EU-generated constraints weaken. The unintended consequence is an arrest or slower development of stable partisan identification, a key factor in party system institutionalization. Another consequence of more unhindered major party ideological (re-) positioning would be the increased capacity to politicize issues whose salience had been beneficial to minor parties; the logic of this should be a further step toward the future stabilization of the party system. Hanley et al. (2008), in an analysis of comparative centre-right party success in post-communist central and eastern Europe, also point to the significance of parties being able to re-package their appeal, noting in particular that with new party elites in place, ‘the subsequent ability of such elites to (re)fashion broad integrative ideological narratives relating post-communist transformation to earlier conservative, nationalist and anti-communist traditions’ (429) appears to have explanatory power over macro-institutional and historical-structural explanations. This chapter argues, observing the timing of the successful ‘re-fashioning’ of Fidesz in Hungary and ODS in the Czech Republic in the Hanley et al. sample, that the EU factor plays a role in the ability to

formulate and express certain positions that during the period before 2000 may have raised concern in Brussels threatening the formal opening of accession negotiations (witness the coalition government led by the Slovak SMER in 2006, which registered less overt concern than the actions of the earlier Mercier government in the late 1990's or even the Austrian ÖVP-FPÖ coalition in 2000). Indeed, incorporating the EU as an intervening factor in the analysis of psi contributes to the research agenda suggesting that 'if elites dominate party system stabilisation, we need to understand their incentive structures' (Tavits 2008b, 549).

Finally, it is possible to illustrate the same phenomenon with post-communist parties other than the set of countries in central and eastern Europe that have been the focus of this study, i.e. those that eventually joined in 2004 and 2007. The case of Croatia demonstrates, albeit with modified conditions specifically relevant to its democratization process – war and nationalist government until 2000 – the principle of instrumental party elite behaviour in relation to perceived constraints transmitted by EU conditionality. Croatia officially applied to join the EU in 2003, and practically speaking, is already accepted as the first country to be added to the EU after the Lisbon Treaty situation is finally resolved (remaining issues surround a border dispute with Slovenia and the broader Balkan affliction of corruption). The main difference between Croatia and the CEE countries as candidates is the lower degree of the power asymmetry between it and the EU (on the issue of power asymmetry between the EU and former Yugoslav states, apart from Slovenia, see Ladrech 2008). That is, to be blunt, the EU has signalled the critical importance of Croatia (and for that matter Serbia) eventually becoming members because of urgent security reasons, i.e. the possibility of new Balkan war(s) and potential EU involvement. This fact represents a fundamental difference between the EU and the CEE countries in the 1990s, where although security concerns were also expressed at the

time, it was a more abstract possibility (the conflict in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s and subsequent EU involvement definitely alter the relationship). Political elites in Croatia are aware of the EU security perspective, and although there is the same set of political conditionality and chapters of the *acquis communautaire* to successfully engage), and added pressure due to the requirement to capture and turn over alleged war criminals to the International Criminal Tribunal, party discourse has followed a pattern where diluted constraints allow more pronounced EU-wariness on the part of the two major parties, depending on government-opposition positions. That is, the party in government promotes itself as the best placed party to guide Croatia into successful and rapid membership, yet when in the opposition, accuses the incumbent party of giving away too much of Croatian sovereignty to the EU in negotiations. This dynamic characterizes both major parties, the Social Democrats and HDZ. How does this reflect on the phenomenon described above with CEE countries? In the first place, the perception that EU membership is not in doubt, only the timing of entry, allows party elites to more closely correspond to voters' positions, including sovereignty issues bound up with EU membership (that is, a soft euro-sceptic position). Employing once more the principal-agent construct, Croatian party leaders, having signalled their intent on joining the EU as soon as possible, find themselves steering their government toward completion of the various chapters of the *acquis communautaire*, that is, meeting EU Commission requirements. At the same time, though, they must 'temper' their enthusiasm for EU membership by the recognition that the Croatian public, from the beginning of Croatia's application to join the EU, whilst supportive of EU membership and aware of EU conditionality, are nevertheless suspicious of certain EU demands, obliging party leaders to placate them in their pro-EU discourse. Fink-Hafner (2008) summarizes this:

The party system has been institutionalized enough to be able to respond

to dual pro-Europeanization pressures (voters' preferences as well as EU actors' pressures) at a satisfactory level. As voters' preferences have not been homogenous (in particular, some reservations regarding Croatia's collaboration with the ICTY have been strongly opposed in public on behalf of the anti-Hague lobby, including war veteran interest groups and for some time even part of the military leadership in some interest groups) and since some remains of ethno-politics still persist, the process of EU integration has involved a push-pull relationship parallel to the Croatian government's two-level game (180).

Again, under modified conditions, the Croatian example serves to illustrate how party leaderships consciously balance the need to meet EU conditions while responding to the dynamics of party competition. Unlike in CEE countries in the 1990s, the leaderships of the two main Croatian parties positioned their parties' discourse in such a way to keep the EU on-board (but in a context in which they realized the EU was willing to be relatively more 'lenient' in some matters in order to keep Croatia in line to join- an EU self-interest) but also signalling from the start a critical embrace of EU membership. Party elite incentives and power within their organization are the similarities between the two cases, CEE and Croatia.

East-West Comparison Revisited

Let us return to the west-east comparison. The present argument underlines an important external environmental factor in the structuring of the policy space of post-communist party systems, i.e., the mutual embrace of the EU by certain party leaderships in the latter half of the 1990s. The analysis traces a dynamic interaction in which the weakening

influence of the EU allows more strategic options to become available to parties, and dominated as they are by their party-in-public office, changes can be attempted without significant resistance by party members or affiliated organizations (both of which are comparatively weak). The argument of a hollowing out of the western European state, and a corresponding reduction in policy differences among major centre-left and centre-right parties due to the migration of certain policy competence to the EU level, would seem to follow a slightly opposite dynamic. As stated above, the development of stable patterns in western party systems preceded the EU, and certainly well before the EU expanded its policy competence from the mid-1980s onwards. As Webb (2002) makes clear, the rise in indicators of greater electoral volatility and number of effective parties have been low but persistent, and have appeared since the 1970s. One reason for the persistence, however, of the main contours of western European party systems is the still effective influence of socio-structural factors such as cleavages. Here we have a difference with eastern, post-communist parties, for whom party elites may have more sway in attempting to re-orient party strategies and ideological profiles than their western counterparts. Secondly, the general parameters of western parties' policy positions also preceded the expansion of EU influence in the domestic policy realm, although there is evidence of an ideological policy-driven shift beginning in the 1980s that cannot be traced solely to the EU, but which EU developments in the late 1980s and 1990s may have consolidated. This is the globalization argument, in which the liberalization of global financial markets, a widespread emphasis on budgetary discipline, corresponding policies of de-regulation and privatization, explain a rightward shift in social democratic and Christian democratic parties. The EU, seen as a regional response to global changes, exerts a rule-bound adaptation to this perceived state of affairs. Therefore the EU is not necessarily seen as the instigator or inculcator of neo-liberal approaches to political

economy, but served as a vehicle to their practice by both centre-left and centre-right parties. The challenge of Europeanization research is precisely to isolate the EU factor in change. In the context of this chapter's discussion, the question is whether these large but gradual changes in the political-economic environment 'trickle down' to the arena of party competition. One could say that if both centre-left and centre right parties shifted somewhat to the right, space is opened up for opportunistic parties on the margins (in particular to the left of social democratic parties). It is precisely parties of the far left and far right, that over the past 15 to 20 years have become established components of many western European party systems, entering parliaments in the 1980s and 1990s, both of which contest the apparent condominium between the main parties of the centre-left and centre-right in major economic policy matters (what the French label 'la pensée unique').

Although analysts do not go so far as to say these parties' success is attributable to a reaction against the EU, that is, a euro-sceptic voter backlash against mainstream parties (most of which are pro-EU), it is the case that a common euro-sceptical thread does link these parties, whether on the right, e.g. the Austrian FPÖ, or the left, e.g. the Dutch Socialist Party. The common critique of these parties is an accusation of policy conformity to the EU's general neo-liberal economic orientation. As a member of the newly formed French New Anti-Capitalist Party phrased it, 'there is no question of the Socialist Party ushering in a neo-liberal policy framework, simply that its institutionalisation will be slower than that of the UMP' (*Le Monde* 1 September 2008). Another difference is the place of party leaderships in most mainstream western parties. Although membership has been decreasing in most parties, and though some speak of a presidentialization (Poguntke and Webb 2005) of party leaders/prime ministers, it remains the case that attempts to alter party programmes is a slow and complicated action, involving not only internal rules integrating activists and the party-in-central

office, but also trade-offs in terms of multi-party coalitions (Heidar and Koole 2000 on the strength of parliamentary parties vis-à-vis other party components; for social democratic parties in particular, see Kitschelt 1999). That change in the profile of major western parties is difficult to execute versus those in post-communist states may also contribute to the lower levels of party system instability, and conversely, as this paper argues, the relative ease for leaderships in this endeavour has contributed toward or prevented the development of stable bonds between voters and parties in the east.

Conclusion

Most work in the area of party system institutionalization and post-communist party systems that seeks to answer the question as to why institutionalization has not proceeded as much as to be expected, focuses on institutional issues – electoral system design, party organization, and issues related to voters – partisanship, cleavage patterns, ideology. The argument of this chapter pays particular attention to the actions of party leaderships, in particular how and why they have altered their individual party profiles since the mid-1990s. The argument here is that movement by parties – that is, the fact that many have been essentially ‘ideological moving targets’ – acts as a factor in preventing stable partisan identification. Furthermore, although it may be expected that in party systems without clear prior patterns of voter-party alignments, that party positioning would be initially fluid, this chapter has argued that the EU played an important role in party leaderships calculations as to the relative positioning of party identity through the ‘pull’ of possible membership. The result of this was reduced competition between mainstream parties over socio-economic issues and the consequent stress on political-cultural ones. The waning of EU conditionality marked in two stages, official pre-accession candidacy

in 2000 and accession in 2004, released party leaderships from the constraint of overt conformity to EU norms, especially in political matters. This ‘condition’ may be described then as ‘shallow’ Europeanization. This paper therefore adds the gradual shift of party identity, as engineered by party leaderships influenced by the goal of EU membership, as a contributing factor to party system instability. It would suggest that post-communist member states – that is, after accession - would be relatively freer in allowing domestic factors to shape their party systems and eventual institutionalization, and at the same time raise the prospect of certain types of conflict with the European Commission over prior agreed conditions.

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