Stepping in the Same River Twice:
Stability Amidst Change in Eastern European Party Competition

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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 paper reconciles these two findings by suggesting that while political organizations come and go, the ideological structure of party competition in eastern Europe 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. Second, focusing on two cases - the Czech Republic and Latvia, we demonstrate that parties replicate a stable competition pattern. 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.
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)? In short, how can we have structured ideological politics in the context of an institutional mess? This puzzle is even more fundamental if we consider the extent to which scholarship on democratic politics underlines the importance of party-voter linkages for the sake of democratic accountability and functioning (Budge et al. 2012, Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012).

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. This metaphor is also relevant for the party politics of eastern Europe, but we would 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 article we argue that ideological politics in eastern Europe is importantly framed by deeply-rooted social structures and historical legacies, which leads to consistent and stable ideological frameworks of party competition that underlie each party system. We do so by developing a number of diverse measures to assess the dimensional structure of party competition. 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. Simultaneously, thanks to the internal fragility, institutional uncertainty, and personnel fluidity of party organizations, political parties come and go; however, they appear (and disappear) in similar ideological positions. We illustrate this process through detailed analysis of two cases – the Czech Republic and Latvia. Our analysis of the appearance and disappearance of political parties in two party systems with important differences further provides evidence that there is similar longevity to the structure of party competition.

Our findings directly 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. Furthermore, our findings have implications outside eastern Europe. Our analysis is consistent with research showing that Latin American parties suffer or disappear completely if they overly dilute their party brand and alienate partisans (Lupu 2014, 2016). In eastern Europe we also find durable ideological foundations of electoral support and the need for parties to occupy particular ideological spaces. In our conclusion we reflect on the central finding that even notoriously volatile party systems are 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.

**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). Only a few party organizations have survived communist rule, and these were either the communist parties and their successors, or they were tainted by cooperation with or tacit approval of the authoritarian regimes. Most party organization thus needed to be built from the ground up in very short time. Consequently, elites dominate the party building process, creating party organizations as personal political platforms, often from within parliaments (Kopecky 1995, Agh 1996, Pridham and Lewis 1996, Zielinski 2002, Van Biezen 2003, Webb and White 2007). The individualistic and socially aloof nature of political organization leads to continuous party switching,
party splits and founding of new parties, which further convolutes the political landscape (Birch 2003; Kreuzer and Pettai 2003). The party systems thus have a higher effective number of parties (Bielsiak 2005), while they maintain lower level of institutionalization (Mainwaring and Torcal 2005). Simultaneously, voters have been fickle. They either switched between parties (Sikk 2005), or turned away from the ballot box (Kostelka 2014) more than in established democracies.

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. Tavits (2008b: 67) consequently finds that “political competition in these fluid party systems is policy-based to a significant degree”, while Whitefield (2002: 191) argues that “[t]here is considerable evidence that post-communist societies contain structured social and ideological divisions ... and that voters choose parties that in large measure programmatically reflect their interests”. Extensive research by Rohrschneider and Whitefield concludes that “[d]espite the fragile nature of party-citizen linkages, weak party organization, and frequent lack of continuity of particular parties themselves, party systems as a whole have coalesced around a predictable set of factors” (2009: 307). 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.

These two views are surprisingly divergent – the image of institutional volatility and electoral fickleness hardly fits a picture of ideological stability – but they are not contradictory. The most recent organizational literature notes that volatility in post-communist eastern Europe is primarily
volatility between old parties and new entrants (Powell and Tucker 2014). It is thus primarily a function of parties coming and going, not of voters switching between continuously existing alternatives. Furthermore, recent research demonstrates that the partisan fluidity in the region produces patterns that can be attributed to particular systemic and partisan characteristics (Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2015). This research suggests that the observed volatility can be stemmed by “investing in organization, becoming a standard bearer on a major issue divide of programmatic competition and finding ways to balance benefits of a vibrant leader with mechanisms for shedding leaders who have become net liabilities” (Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2015: 14, cf. Deegan-Krause and Haughton 2010).

Considering programatic competition, the ideological literature argues that the structure of eastern European party systems can be depicted in two dimensions – one pertaining to the state’s role in the management of the economy ranging from economic left to economic right, and the other pertaining to non-economic socio-cultural issues spanning from social liberalism to social conservatism (see Kitschelt 1992, Kitschelt 1995, Marks et al. 2006, Vachudova and Hooghe 2009). While the ideological research finds that parties even in eastern Europe hold structured positions in this space, providing voters with reasonable levels of predictability (Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012: 84), the structural literature assessing partisan volatility points out that “new parties tend to appear where other parties have already died or appear in danger of death” (Deegan-Krause and Haughton 2010: 236, see also Deegan-Krause and Haughton 2009).

This suggests that despite the volatility in its organizational expression (parties), party systems of eastern Europe are ideologically stable. Each system has a set of core underlying political conflicts that are consistently expressed and bundled by a set of political parties that may, however, come and go. There is thus an abiding ideological framework within eastern Eu-
ropean party systems that has been shaped by a number of contemporary and historical factors. Much of the literature has focused on the impact of post-communist transitions and the economic considerations they entailed (e.g. Kitschelt 1995, Kitschelt et al. 1999, Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012). Others also highlight the role of ethnicity (Rovny 2014), religion (Markowski 2006, Toka and Henjak 2007) and state-building (Evans and Whitefield 1993, 2000), as important sources of party competition patterns across the region.

Consequently, we expect that individual party systems in eastern Europe exhibit relatively consistent and stable lines of competition. This competition is expressed by both: political party positions and oppositions, and by voter preferences. However, given the organizational instability of political parties in the region, we expect more-less continuous replacement of individual political parties with others. Party organizations and their labels thus come and go, but they recreate stable competition structures underpinned by reasonably durable voter distributions. Under such conditions the two literatures reviewed above are less difficult to reconcile with one another. Party organizations are unstable, and consequently voters are more likely to support different parties in subsequent elections. However, new or merged parties replicate stable competition patterns which leads to overall ideological stability and ideologically-driven associations between (volatile) parties and voters.

Our argument that eastern European politics revolve around stable lines of conflict, despite volatile party organizations, does not mean that politics in the region is inert. Indeed, various aspects of politics can change while key divides abide. First, political support can shift from one side of the divide to the other, leading to change in government and in policy outcomes. Second, new or previously uncontested political issues can be associated with an original divide, changing its salience. Finally, there may be a shift in the
rhetoric used to compete over a standing political divide.

This argument has a number of observable implications. First, we expect to see a stable structure of competition across eastern European countries, which – while divergent across countries – remains relatively stable within countries over time. Second, we expect to see a steady replication of these structures by political parties, despite party deaths, births and mergers. The subsequent sections address these expectations by assessing the structure of competition in Eastern Europe, and the stability of this structure over time.

Measuring Competition Structure in eastern Europe

As mentioned above, party competition in eastern Europe can be meaningfully captured in a two-dimensional space spanning economic and socio-cultural issues. 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).

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 Elec-
tion 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 crucial 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 significantly across countries of the region, 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 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 dimen-
sions 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 second 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.\footnote{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.} In the next section, we discuss our second indicator for the dimensional struc-
ture of central and 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\(^2\) to arrive at a measure of dimensional uncertainty difference (\(UD\)):

\[
UD = SD_{economic} - SD_{non-economic}
\]

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 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

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\(^2\)This is based on the economic left-right and gal-tan standard deviations in the CHES data.
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. 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. The model is estimated in each party system using logistic regression analysis, and controlling for age, gender, education and income:

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

This vote choice model produces estimates for the coefficients of interest, \(\beta_1\) 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: \(\text{Difference} = |\beta_2| - |\beta_1|\). The greater its value, the more predominant are socio-cultural preferences over economic preferences in voting behavior.

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3 See table 10 in the appendix for the list of parties considered major left and major right.

4 See appendix for details about the factor analysis.
Dimensional Cohesiveness

Our final measure investigates the compactness of political preferences and returns to the CHES data. We perform principal factor analysis on the twelve policy-specific questions included in the 2006 and 2010 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, multiculturalism vs. assimilation to integrate newcomers, 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 with varimax rotation reveals substantial variation in the cohesiveness of this latent dimension throughout the party systems of eastern Europe. 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 sums the relative size of the eigenvalue ($E_{vi}$) of each of the first four principal factors:

\[ \text{Index} = \sum_{i=1}^{4} E_{vi} \]

5The results are substantively unaltered if we use unrotated factor analysis.
6This index was initially developed by Rovny and Marks (2011).
7The index considers only the first 4 principal factors because this is the highest number of factors with eigenvalues over 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).
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 striking and 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. All the associations are statistically significant. With the exception of the association between the cohesion index and the axis slope, the correlation coefficients are strong \((r > 0.4)\). A principal component analysis of these four measures produces one factor with eigenvalue greater than one, explaining 69% of the variance. This is quite encouraging given the diverse techniques and data used to construct these measures.

The second important feature of our four measures is that they vary significantly more across countries than over time. Table 2 demonstrates that the between country variance is significantly greater than the over-time,
Table 1: Correlation of Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohesion Index</th>
<th>Axis Slope Absolute</th>
<th>Expert Uncertainty Difference</th>
<th>Vote Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.3934*</td>
<td>0.4389*</td>
<td>0.4028*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.6862*</td>
<td>0.5094*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.5810*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pairwise correlation coefficients. *p < 0.05

within country variance on the key measures.\(^8\) 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.\(^9\)

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. Furthermore, the significantly lower within country, over-time variance demonstrates the relative temporal stability of 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 strikingly defined

\(^{8}\)Please note that since our measure of Vote Difference is captured only at one time point, it has no within country variance, and is thus excluded here.

\(^{9}\)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.
Table 2: Within and between country variance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Var</th>
<th>Variance ratio test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cohesion Index: within country variance</td>
<td>0.0282</td>
<td>0.0008</td>
<td>$F=0.1434_{(18,9)}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohesion Index: between country variance</td>
<td>0.0743</td>
<td>0.0055</td>
<td>$p=0.000$ (two-tailed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Axis Slope Absolute: within country variance</td>
<td>0.4081</td>
<td>0.1665</td>
<td>$F=0.3765_{(28,9)}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Axis Slope Absolute: between country variance</td>
<td>0.6650</td>
<td>0.4423</td>
<td>$p=0.046$ (two-tailed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertainty Difference: within country variance</td>
<td>0.2127</td>
<td>0.0452</td>
<td>$F=0.2482_{(19,9)}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertainty Difference: between country variance</td>
<td>0.4269</td>
<td>0.1823</td>
<td>$p=0.010$ (two-tailed)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.

and stable.

Case Studies

The previous section demonstrated the presence of consistent and temporally stable ideological spaces across ten eastern European countries. This section focuses on two cases – the Czech Republic and Latvia – to demonstrate the longevity of their ideological spaces. While the Czech Republic is considered a largely stable party system, Latvia is seen as the exact opposite (e.g. Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2015, Mainwaring and Zoco 2007). These two cases thus allow us to assess the extent to which volatile parties represent a stable underlying ideological structure.

We proceed by presenting the positions of the electorate over multiple years spanning the post-1989 era, while also estimating vote choice models to demonstrate the relative importance of different ideological and social factors in electoral behavior across the two cases. In the first step, we construct a generic political space spanning the economic and socio-cultural dimension.
In the second step, we place voters of diverse political poles in this space based on their political preferences, and we observe the relative positions. This is a rather conservative test of positional stability because the space in each year is constructed using different survey questions, based on data availability.\textsuperscript{10} Consequently, it is not possible to compare the spaces directly. One should only consider the relative positions of one set of voters vis-à-vis other voters in the current year. Note that while we assess the vote for and the position of general political poles rather than individual political parties, this is done primarily for the simplicity of presentation. Considering individual parties produces substantively comparable results. In both the Czech Republic and Latvia we discern stable ideological currents represented in the electorate. The voters continuously support actors that represent their interests over the key divides, despite the fact that the individual party organizations come and go.

\textbf{The Czech Republic}

The Czech Republic is generally considered as a more stable party system in the region. Its political landscape can be generally divided into four major and two minor political poles: 1) the radical left, 2) the moderate left, 3) the conservative right, 4) the liberal right; and the minor 5) Christian democratic, and 6) radical right pole.\textsuperscript{11} The left flank of the party system has been continuously represented by the intransigent Communist Party (KSČM) and the major Social Democratic Party (ČSSD). However, the right flank has witnessed a periodic turnover of liberal parties, trying to wrest right-wing dominance form the conservative ODS. It is the turnover on the right-wing of the party system that is of particular interest here. These parties come and

\textsuperscript{10}See the appendix for details.
\textsuperscript{11}See the appendix for more detailed discussion of the political poles in the Czech Republic.
Table 3: Effect of Economic Preferences on Vote in the Czech Republic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Radical_Left</th>
<th>Moderate_Left</th>
<th>Liberal_Right</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>-3.077***</td>
<td>-2.197***</td>
<td>-0.497**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>-0.469***</td>
<td>-0.346***</td>
<td>-0.029</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>-2.543***</td>
<td>-1.358***</td>
<td>-0.403</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>-1.042***</td>
<td>-0.374***</td>
<td>0.021</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Baseline is vote for Conservative Right

...go, but do they replicate a stable pattern of competition? In what follows, we aim to demonstrate that while the parties of the liberal right appear and disappear, they do so in structurally determined places in the Czech political space. To assess the stability of the competition space in the Czech Republic, we rely on representative surveys of the population in four different years – 1996, 2002, 2009 and 2012 – using various data sources, estimating vote choice models, and presenting the placements of voters.

First we estimate a vote choice model in each of the four years under study, where we predict vote choice for the different political poles discussed above as a function of voters’ economic and socio-cultural preference, while controlling for gender, age, education, and income (see the appendix for detailed results). The models underline the centrality of economics in political competition in the Czech Republic. Indeed, economic preferences are the strongest and most consistent predictor of vote choice in the country, as they clearly divide the electorate across the political poles. In the case of the liberal right electorate, it is distinct from the other political poles by its economic liberalism, while it occasionally differs from the conservative right by being more socially liberal. Table 3 summarizes the key results. The vote choice models thus demonstrate the abiding political divides in the Czech Republic.
Figure 1: Competition Space in the Czech Republic Over Time

Note: Mean voter positions with 95% confidence intervals.
Figure 1 summarizes the mean voter placements with 95% confidence intervals in the Czech Republic in the four observed years. First, it is clear from the figure that the overall layout of voter preferences in the Czech Republic consistently connects left-wing economics with social conservatism and right-wing economics with social liberalism. Voter placement thus generally progresses from left-conservative to right-liberal. Second, we can see the consistent placement of radical left KSČM voters – always the most economically left-leaning and the most socially conservative voters surveyed. Similarly, the placement of moderate left (ČSSD) voters is consistently one step to the economic right and toward social liberalism compared with the radical left. Christian democratic voters are always centrist.\footnote{Note that KDU-CSL was a part of the right-liberal ‘Koalice’ in 2002 with the libertarian US.}

Turning to the more transient liberal right, we see that despite the fact that the parties representing this political pole continuously change, the position of their voters remain strikingly consistent. They are uniformly placed at the liberal extreme of the Czech political space, and while significantly to the right, they are always slightly to the left of the conservative right pole. Interestingly, it is the voters of the established conservative right pole, continuously represented by ODS, that display any significant movement over time. While they are generally economically right-leaning and significantly socially liberal, in 2009 they shift toward social conservatism in comparison with their long-term stance. This is likely caused by the ideological shift of party leadership which after the Czech Republic’s accession to the EU in 2004 felt freer to explore Eurosceptic and nationalist themes (Vachudova 2008).

In sum, the rise and fall of minor liberal right parties creates a significant turnover in political organization in the Czech Republic, causing increased electoral volatility. Nonetheless, these political actors conspicuously replicate
the positions of their predecessors, and compete on the same ideological divides, thus reproducing a stable competition pattern.

Latvia

In comparison with the Czech Republic, the Latvian party system is significantly more volatile with a continuous turnover of political formations that appear, merge, splinter, or die. Nevertheless, the Latvian political landscape can be characterized by four main political poles that have been present since the country regained independence in the early 1990s. In addition to two poles that can be broadly labeled as the left and the moderate right, Latvian politics also includes a pole made up of agrarian parties, and one that combines nationalist right-wing forces.\textsuperscript{13} While each one of these poles is represented by a larger number of passing party organizations and is consequently less homogenous than those in the Czech Republic, each pole maintains a specific political identity in the context of Latvian political competition.

To demonstrate the stability of these four ideological poles in Latvian politics over the post-independence period, we assess voter placements and electoral calculus across four years – 1996, 1998, 2002, and 2009. As in the Czech Republic, we use diverse data source of varying quality and different questions. While the Latvian case does not present the same level of durability as the Czech Republic, it emphasizes the continuing relevance of and stable positioning on its primary political divide – the ethno-national cleavage.

First, we estimate a vote choice model for the four political poles in Latvia, predicting vote with economic and social preferences. We control not only for gender, age, education and income, but also for whether a respondent is a member of an ethnic minority. The models (available in the appendix) strikingly demonstrate that economic and socio-cultural preferences play a

\textsuperscript{13}See the appendix for more detailed discussion of political poles in Latvia.
Table 4: Effect of Ethnic Minority Status on Vote in Latvia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Left</th>
<th>Agrarian</th>
<th>Nationalist Right</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>1.316***</td>
<td>-0.036</td>
<td>-0.747***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>2.727***</td>
<td>-0.009</td>
<td>-13.328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>3.104***</td>
<td>-0.517</td>
<td>-13.435</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Baseline is vote for Moderate Right. The insignificant results for the Nationalist Right in 2002 and 2009, despite the large coefficient, are caused by the fact that in these years no member of ethnic minority claims to have voted for that political pole, causing very large standard errors.

minimal role in Latvian electoral calculus. Only the left pole tends to be supported by more socially liberal voters. The most powerful predictor of voting behavior in Latvia across our data is ethnic minority status. Table 4 summarizes the key results. Indeed, ethnic minorities are overwhelmingly likely to support the political left, while the nationalist right receives almost all of its support from ethnic Latvians.\(^{14}\)

The dominance of ethnic politics in Latvia is also visible in voter placements. Figure 2 summarizes the mean voter placements with 95% confidence intervals in Latvia in the four observed years. On first reading, the placement of the four political poles seems rather erratic. However, upon closer inspection it becomes clear that the slippery nature of the block placements is caused by movements on the economic dimension – the dimension that has no significant impact on vote choice in our models. The low relevance

\(^{14}\)In the 2002 and 2009 datasets no member of ethnic minority claims to have voted for the nationalist right. Additional analysis of the 2002 data which includes a specific question on ethnic nationalism suggests that the question of ethnicity is the key predictor of vote even among the Latvian ethnic majority. Whether an ethnic Latvian supports the left, the moderate right, the agrarians or the national right is best predicted by her views of ethnic minorities.
of the economic dimension is further demonstrated by the larger and overlapping confidence intervals on economic placement. Consistent with this reading, the political block that significantly emphasizes economic issues – the moderate right – has the smallest confidence intervals on this dimension.

The picture becomes much more consistent when concentrating on the social dimension – which is intrinsically related to the question of ethnic minorities (see Rovny 2014). Here we see that the left political pole is consistently and (almost\(^{15}\)) always significantly more socially liberal than the other three poles. Similarly, the nationalist right pole is consistently the most socially conservative, though its confidence intervals overlap with the other two political blocks that tend to represent ethnic Latvians.

In sum, the organizationally volatile Latvian party system is home to ideologically consistent and continuously present political blocks that are primarily defined by their approach to the question of Latvian statehood and the rights of non-Latvian ethnics. This makes ethnicity the predominant determinant of vote choice, while the political blocks are continuously, and consistently distinctive in their socio-cultural placements which are closely related to their views about rights and freedoms of ethnic minorities.

### Conclusion

This paper 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 paper has thus been to reconcile

\(^{15}\)The mean placement of the left pole is always more socially liberal than of the other poles. In 1996 this placement is not statistically significant which may be attributed to the low quality of the 1996 data.
Figure 2: Competition Space in Latvia Over Time

Note: Mean voter positions with 95% confidence intervals.
this academic divide. Our main argument is that 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 describe the striking structural consistency of ideological patterning in eastern Europe.

The first section has demonstrated that 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. 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 underscores the temporal longevity of party competition structure in the region.

Our second empirical section focused on the Czech Republic and Latvia – two party systems with highly divergent levels of organizational volatility. This section demonstrated the temporal longevity of the core competition structure in each country in detail. It showed that while a number of parties have come and gone since the 1990s, their appearance and disappearance occurred in predictable ideological positions, and represented ideologically similar segments of the electorate. The organizational disappearance of certain political parties in the Czech Republic and Latvia generally coincided with the founding or merging and subsequent election of very similar political actors located in similar positions in the electorally relevant ideological space. In both countries this dynamic resulted in a continuous replication of a unique competition pattern.

Our argument can shed light on current developments in eastern Europe that have attracted international attention – namely the conservative politi-
cal turn in Hungary, and more recently in Poland. The main political divide in Hungary and Poland combines economic preferences together with general socio-cultural visions of society (Rovny 2014), pitting pro-market liberal forces (including the reformed ex-communists) against national and Christian conservatives.¹⁶ In both countries, this core divide remains unaltered, even as it witnesses a flux of party organizations on either side of the divide. The key recent change in both countries has been the continuous weakening of the socially-liberal pole of the main political divide, coupled with increasingly bold assertions of conservative nationalism from the opposite side. In addition, the conservative pole in both countries has been strengthened by the so-called ‘migration crisis’ of 2015. The conservatives of both countries profited from this exogenous shock by integrating the political issue of immigration – hitherto novel in Hungarian and Polish politics – into the standing liberal-conservative divide, and taking a vocal position on it. The significant changes in Poland and Hungary amount to worrying attempts at the hollowing of liberal democracy, and the fueling of xenophobic nationalism. These changes are, however, taking place within the historical liberal-conservative political divide which has shaped the politics of these countries over the last quarter century.

This paper thus takes some significant steps towards harmonizing the seemingly incompatible 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 remarkably fixed political divides. This points to two important conclusions. First, there are two very different forms of structure at play in party systems.

¹⁶This is demonstrated in our data, where Hungary and Poland share the presence of a relatively highly cohesive dimension of competition (high cohesion index score) which tends to combine economic and socio-cultural issues (higher axis slope scores).
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 article demonstrates to be remarkably 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 everywhere 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.
References


