

The transition to democracy and consolidation of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe is a widely debated topic within the study of comparative politics. Nearly twenty years after embarking on the democratization and economic liberalization path, most of these states have emerged with stable and internationally accepted democratic systems. The literature on democratization has identified many different factors that contribute to the success of democracy (its stabilization and consolidation) in post-communist states. One of the crucial factors in the development of democracy is institution-building. New democratic states must rapidly and decisively put democratic institutions in place in order to be able to carry out the procedures related to democracy. Institutions include not only the governing bodies, but also political parties, which form the basis of political competition. The development and maintenance of political parties is crucial to newly-formed democracies, and the ability of parties to win elections, survive, and adapt is one important indicator of the successful functioning of democracy.

Studies of newly-formed or renewed political parties and political party systems focus on the contexts and conditions for their development, incorporating a variety of variables that account for differences in their consolidation and institutionalization. Hand in hand with the institutionalization of political parties is the establishment or stabilization of a party system, defined as the patterned interactions (competition and cooperation) between different parties in a system. While it has been argued that the term “party system” should be used only in cases when patterned interactions are established (Mair 1997), I take a looser understanding of the term, and will seek to evaluate whether the party systems in the Czech and Slovak Republics have stabilized and consolidated. Many different factors have been identified as connected specific structure of the party system: historical legacies, previous regime types, type of democratic governmental system, electoral structure and law, as well as the parties themselves.

Political parties are considered of the utmost importance to democracy in many post-communist states. This is reflected even in the post-communist constitutions with the “constitutional anchoring” of political parties in the Czech Republic (Šimíček 2003). Article 5 of the 1993 Czech constitution states “The political system is based on the free and voluntary foundation and free competition of political parties...” Similarly, the

Slovak constitution guarantees the autonomy of political parties and citizens' participation in them: "Citizens have the right to establish political parties and political movements and to associate in them. ... Political parties and political movements, as well as clubs, societies, and other associations are separated from the state" (Article 29, Sections 2 and 4). Thus, not only do political theorists consider parties necessary for the development, but so do the lawmakers and institution-builders within the states in question. Thus parties offer themselves as an important aspect of democratization to be examined and analyzed.

While many studies of party systems are quite broad and include many different countries over a given period of time, this study will be more limited in its scope. I will focus on political party systems and their development in two Central European states during the post-communist era. The two states chosen are the Czech Republic and Slovakia, successor states to the former Czechoslovakia. These states have been chosen because, despite their similarity in many political and historical aspects, and their shared statehood under communism, and during the early years of transition, there are some important differences in the development of their political systems after 1989.

This study will attempt to describe and analyze the development of the political party system in the post-communist Czech and Slovak Republics after 1989. I will rely on comparative analysis as a method of comparing the different development of the party systems in the two states. Both qualitative and quantitative data from primary and secondary sources will be employed. The structure of the paper should be arranged along temporal lines, describing and comparing the development of each party system in several stages. These stages are:

- A. The communist era of hegemonic party rule, included to help demonstrate possible legacies of the communist "party system";
- B. The formation of opposition coalitions and their success in the first post-communist elections;
- C. The breakup of these large coalitions into smaller parties: this section will include an overview of the disintegration of Czechoslovakia;
- D. The "turning point" 1998 elections: marked by struggle within and among the parties in both countries;

E. The final stage covers the two most recent electoral periods: 1998-2002 and 2002 until just before the 2006 elections;

Sections B, C, and E will include evaluations of the party systems including attempts at classifications following Sartori's (1976) model. I will also analyze the behavior and interactions of the individual parties with the goal of classifying them along ideological and behavioral models discussed in the section on theory. The final section will also include some prospects for the future of the Czech and Slovak party systems. Another section after the time-period analyses will focus specifically on the development of a phenomenon unique to post-communist party systems: communist successor parties. This section will be devoted to the description and analysis of the different development and roles of the KSČM in the Czech Republic, and the SDL in Slovakia.

At a time when studies of democratic transition are moving away from the Central and Eastern European region, this project brings light to the fact that while countries like the Czech and Slovak Republics are widely considered success-stories in democratization, there are still unresolved issues and important developments that need to be made. Particularly with regards to Slovakia, this analysis will show that consolidation of the party system has not happened, even after 16 years of democratization. On the other hand, the applicability to the Czech system of models built on Western European cases helps solidify the argument that its party system has stabilized and consolidated.