

Tomáš Jarmara

Institutionalization of Post-Communist Political Parties

Wschodnioznawstwo 5, 177-189

2011

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Tomáš Jarmara

Institutionalization of Post-Communist Political Parties

Introduction

In regard to the political development of the countries of Eastern and Central Europe, there has been a great deal of attention devoted by political scientists to the emergence of political parties during the process of democratic transition. While the development of political parties in the western democracies has been practically linear except for the World War II era, the countries of southern, central, and eastern Europe have taken a different course. Greece, Spain, and Portugal, and most of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, where the process of democratic transition took place in the 1970s or 1990s, have had shorter or longer periods of democratic governance in their modern history, and thus some previous experience with the process of forming political parties.

This creates a very specific set of conditions for the creation of political parties, amplified by the unstable environment of the transition process itself, which could be described as an interval between two political regimes, and interval in which

...there are no firmly defined and generally accepted rules of the game; when actors strive not only to satisfy their own immediate interests (and the interests of those whom they claim to represent), but also to establish rules and procedures, the configuration of which will determine winners and losers in the future¹.

In political science literature the process of establishing political parties is referred to as institutionalization. The goal of this article is to shed some light on the process of political parties' institutionalization, and then analyze the institutionalization of the Czech political parties, comparing them with some of the political parties in the countries of Central Europe where (re-)institutionalization took place during the course of the democratic transition.

¹ V. Dvořáková, J. Kunc, *O přechodech k demokracii*, Praha 1994, p. 77.

Institutionalization

The institutionalization of political parties has been defined as the process of the creation, development, and continued existence of political parties, which usually depends on the overall conditions for the creation and existence of political parties, whether at the highest, constitutional level, or on the laws concerning political parties derived from it.

The institutionalization of political parties can also be described as a process in which the party as an organization, through its actions and mere existence, becomes an „objective”, matter-of-course, socially recognized part of the social system. One trait of institutionalization is that the party as a formal institution takes on a distinctive set of characteristics that are the result of its operation, goals, and values. The process of institutionalization also refers to the gradual stabilization of organizations through formation of mutual linkages and loyalties among members of political parties, and between them and voters. Forming these linkages takes time, and depends on the continued existence of the political party over time. An **institution** can be defined as a commonplace organization or element of political or social life that acts as a regulatory mechanism over shared principles or agreements, and serves the needs of society and the common purposes of civilization.

In political science literature several conceptualizations have been put forth about how political parties become institutions. One of the better ones is by Robert Harmel and Lars Gerhard Svåsand², who stress the evolutionary development of a political party, for which the key to successful institutionalization is coping with three main phases: identification, organization, and stabilization. This concept is unique for perceiving that forming solid relations with the other parties is an element of stabilization. Institutionalization is seen to include dynamic interaction among the parties, and therefore takes the shape of the party system into account. An older, but more oft-cited is the „classic” concept of Angelo Panebianco. Because of its sophistication and its use of more criteria, it appears to be the most suitable for application to the process of institutionalization of the Czech political parties.

Panebianco, too, regards institutionalization as an evolutionary process that can be tracked in two dimensions:

1. the autonomy of political parties in the sense of their separateness from their environment,
2. internal organizational cohesion, which Panebianco labels as systematicity³.

Autonomy can be understood as the ability of political parties to separate themselves from the surrounding environment. The party has an autonomous position

² R. Harmel, L. G. Svåsand, *Party Leadership and Party Institutionalization: Three Phases of Development*, „West European Politics” 1993, vol. 16, no. 2.

³ A. Panebianco, *Political Parties: Organization and Power*. Cambridge-New York 1988, p. 51.

of full self-control, determining its own direction and existence. Loss of autonomy would mean that the party is controlled, dependent, or regulated in its activities by other organizations. Panebianco emphasizes that positions of autonomy/dependence are not absolute categories, but matters of degree. Institutionalization can thus be linked to a certain aspect of autonomy that may be greater or lesser.

Although German labor organizations are not institutionally tied to the SPD, their relationship remains close. Nearly half of the SPD representatives in the Bundestag are labor union activists, even though there is no method of nomination, election, or reservation of electable positions for union activists on SPD ballots⁴. Panebianco on the other end gives Duverger's mass party as an example of a party with extensive autonomy. This is financially supported by the income of its members, who mobilize in working for the party, and the party's membership base has the crucial position in electing party elites. The British Labour Party was similarly linked to the unions through the system of collective membership and to a certain degree through members' financial contributions.

The degree of „systematicity” signifies the ability to build a firm, long-standing, and hierarchical organizational structure, as the decisive factor is the degree of autonomy and independence of the lower party units; i.e., the regional and local party structures. Where their degree of independence is high, systematicity is low, and vice versa. A political party with relatively loose ties between the central apparatus and autonomously-behaving lower structures tends to be internally differentiated and heterogeneous. According to Panebianco the factors that determine the level of institutionalization are the following:

- the party's level of organization outside the parliamentary structures;
- the position of the central bureaucratic apparatus and a unified manner of management;
- the level of financing;
- relations with external or associated organizations;
- the extent of accord between the delegative mechanisms of the party and the figures who actually hold the leadership functions⁵.

A high level of institutionalization is exhibited by political parties with a strong, centralized bureaucratic apparatus, which guides and controls the activities of the party's regional and local structures. If the local units of the party are organized along the same principles, this will tend to eliminate internal diversity, and determine the degree of integration within the party's organizational structure (systematicity).

⁴ German surveys confirm that members of union organizations tend to be consistent SPD voters (Stammwähler). The support of labor organizations is therefore very important for the SPD's success. *Koncepcie sociálního tržního hospodářství*, Praha 2000.

⁵ A. Panebianco, *op.cit.*, p. 56.

Sufficient resources and regular financing clearly contribute to a political party's autonomy, among other things allowing it to maintain one of the fundamental elements of institutionalization: a professional party bureaucracy.

Strongly institutionalized parties are clearly dominant over their affiliated or allied organizations. This is especially true for those that have been founded or authorized by the party itself, and have been given the status of associate organization. A different situation, which could be expressed in terms of degree of affiliation, applies for relationships with friendly organizations. There are various degrees of autonomy/dependence between the individual social democratic parties and the labor unions, the Christian parties and the church, right-wing parties with employer unions, and so on.

Strongly institutionalized parties have standardized mechanisms that select the party's leaders. A low degree of institutionalization is indicated where these mechanisms are circumvented or function in name only. The leadership candidates recruited fail to gain support from within the party, but depend on the position they hold in other organizations or outside the party altogether. A frequent reason for this is the lack of financial resources; in this situation parties invite to run on their ballot candidates with strong support outside the party, who are able to help the party finance its campaign. Parties lacking strong personalities within the party may give precedence to a candidate from outside the party in order to benefit from that candidate's personal prestige. It is clear that the loyalty of people chosen in such a manner will be low.

One indicator of strong institutionalization is the absence-existence of factionalism, and a decisive party leadership able to impose its will. Another is the presence of a tangible party „sub-culture” and the existence of career paths within the party. Each party member is aware that placement in any function depends on gradually building up a career step by step from the bottom according to certain rules. By contrast, quick and sudden jumps to the highest party offices are an indicator of weak institutionalization.

The process of institutionalization is also determined by the circumstances surrounding the party's founding. Panebianco writes of what he calls the critical factors of institutionalization, which are given by three circumstances pertaining to a party's founding:

- territorial penetration;
- territorial diffusion;
- a combination of territorial penetration and diffusion⁶.

Territorial penetration is where the basic impulse for the formation of a political party comes from a central inception point that initiates the founding of local organizations, which it then controls and guides. The dominant position of the central structure contributes rapid institutionalization.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 55.

Diffusion is the case where a party is founded on the initiative of local political elites, which first create local structures, then build country-wide organizations. A higher number of local centers weakens or slows the process of institutionalization.

A combination of territorial penetration and diffusion can strengthen and speed institutionalization. In the case of tension between the centers and the local centers, which feel a lesser degree of loyalty and possess a certain amount of autonomy, the process of institutionalization may be weakened.

Another critical factor in the institutionalization of political parties is the possibility of a sponsor or patron, the term which best expresses the relationship between a party's founder (sponsor/patron) and the emerging organization (political party)⁷. The sponsor is the organization that first initiated the founding of the political party. The existence of a sponsor organization means that the party will be in second place in terms of the loyalty of voters and party members, while the sponsoring organization will be in first place. The position of the party leadership is identical: it finds in the sponsor the legitimization of its origin in the founding organization. An example of a sponsor is the Solidarity movement, which gave rise to three different political formations.

A similar situation occurred in other post-communist countries, where the sponsor impeded the institutionalization of political parties or prevented it entirely. One example is the Civic Movement, the founding of which was practically forced by the ODS's departure from the Civic Forum. The majority of members sympathized with Václav Havel's concept of non-political politics, and the movement was seen as the successor to the Civic Forum. Not even the later transformation of the movement into a political party (Free Democrats) prevented the marginalization of this political grouping. The fate of the Civic Movement is a textbook case of a political party's failure to cope with the process of institutionalization, in every criteria put forth by Panebianco.

Table 1. Relation of factors of institutionalization of political parties.

Conditions for formation of a political party	Institutionalization
Territorial diffusion	Weak
Territorial penetration	Weak
Internal legitimacy	Weak
External legitimacy (domestic sponsor)	Weak
External legitimacy (foreign sponsor)	Strong/weak
Charismatic leader	Strong/weak

Source: A. Panebianco, *Political Parties: Organization and Power*, Cambridge-New York 1988, p. 67.

⁷ P. Lewis, *Introduction and Theoretical Overview*, [in:] *Party Structure and Organization in East-Central Europe*, P. Lewis (ed.), Cheltenham 1996, p. 1-19.

Two types of sponsors can initiate the foundation of a political party: domestic and foreign. A domestic sponsor gives the new party internal legitimacy, which helps institutionalization more than the external legitimacy represented by a foreign sponsor. An example of a political party relying on external legitimacy could be the Communist Party during the existence of the Soviet Union, or parties of the Fascist type such as Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists.

The final criterion influencing the process of institutionalization is the presence or absence of a strong, charismatic political leader. The mutual interrelationship of all the above factors and their influence on degree of institutionalization is illustrated by Table 1, which shows that in the case of parties being founded by the process of penetration, there exists from the very beginning a strong center assisting the party's institutionalization. Diffusion is demonstrated by the presence of a larger number of local centers, which weaken the position of the party's central leadership.

Likewise, the difference between internal and external legitimacy and the existence or absence of a sponsor influences the ability of a party to separate itself from the external environment. An exception might be a political party with a foreign sponsor that can equip the party with internal means of institutionalization. As demonstrated by the fate of the communist parties in the former Soviet satellites, the price of institutionalization may be very high. The party becomes dependent on its foreign sponsor in order to hold on to power, and loses legitimacy on the domestic scene.

The charismatic leader is a factor that can both strengthen or weaken institutionalization. The moment that charismatic leader departs, the party is weakened and may not survive.

In conclusion we would emphasize that Panebianco himself sees the institutionalization process as very dynamic, progressing in stages. Strong or weak institutionalization is not a permanent state of affairs, but is subject to change over time.

The establishment of Czech political parties during the democratic transformation process

The Czech political parties that were founded during the process of democratic transition faced the difficult task of institutionalizing themselves, a task complicated by the fact that the constitution and the laws regulating the establishment and activities of political parties were in a state of flux.

The first factor that affected the process of institutionalization of political parties was the very circumstances of their founding. From this standpoint Czech political parties in Central and Eastern Europe can be divided into four groups:

1. The communist parties that underwent reorganization changed their names or began again as a new formation independent of their previous activities;
2. Non-communist parties that had been legal under the national fronts during the era of the communist regimes;
3. The „historic” parties based on the parties that existed prior to the non-democratic regime;
4. Parties emerging from organizations such as the civic forums or social movements active at the time of the democratic transition. These were completely new parties founded by representatives of the former anti-communist opposition or persons taking part in the political changes.

Communist parties

Unlike the newly-forming parties, the former communist parties had a strong organizational base, formalized structure, and professional party bureaucracy. Other advantages included material resources such as administrative buildings, fleets of vehicles, financial resources, and other types of property. In the case of the Czech communists there was to be a return of property under Law No. 496/1990 on the return of KSCĚ property to the people of Czechoslovakia. However not all of its property was taken away, and in 1990 for example the KSČM bought itself a building for its party headquarters that cost 52 million Czechoslovak crowns.

These parties had in most cases a very good starting position. On the other hand the majority of these parties, to a greater or lesser degree, now found themselves in a “hostile environment”, even in their new forms, which were still associated with the former communist regimes. There is a large number of these successor parties; in the countries of Central Europe and the Baltics alone six such parties can be identified: the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM), in Slovakia the Party of the Democratic Left (SDL), the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), in Poland the Union of the Democratic Left (SLD), in Slovenia the United Ballot of the Social Democrats (ZLSD), and the Democratic Workers’ Party of Lithuania (LDDP). Paul G. Lewis, who has studied party families in the post-communist countries with the exception of the Russian Federation, classified 16 political parties on the basis of their „common heritage” as successor parties of the former communist-type political parties⁸.

⁸ G. P. Lewis, *Political Parties In Post-Communist Eastern Europe*, London 2000, p. 58.

The non-communist parties of the national fronts

A special type of party that can be placed in the category of „post-communist” parties are the **non-communist parties** that legally operated under the various national fronts in the communist countries. The situation varied widely depending on the country, because in some of the communist countries besides the purely one-party system there was, existing alongside, the system with one hegemonic party that permitted other satellite parties to function. There were one-party systems in Albania, Yugoslavia, Romania, Hungary, and the Soviet Union. In the other countries of Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and East Germany, there were more political parties present many of which, under the new conditions, set about (re)institutionalizing themselves. Examples of parties that successfully managed the process of democratic transition and established itself as a party with representation in parliament are the Polish and Czech People’s parties. The agrarian Zjednoczone Stronnictwo Ludowe (ZSL) transformed itself right away in 1990 into the Polish People’s Party, and in 1992 the Czech People’s Party expanded its name to become the Christian Democratic Union – Czech People’s Party (KDU-ČSL).

The historic parties

The first group of the „historic” parties can be divided into two categories. In the first are parties with a positive historical legacy, which helps its legitimization and strengthens the party’s trustworthiness under the new conditions. Many parties in Central and Eastern Europe have banked on this type of legacy. One such set of parties was the social democrats, who were careful to distinguish themselves from the social democratic parties that were created in the transformation of the former communist parties. The Czech Social Democrats are an example of a historic party. Immediately after the transformation it was not recognized as an already-existing political party under the so-called „small law” on political parties (Law No. 15/1990), and this handicapped it somewhat. Nevertheless, despite efforts to question its historical continuity it became clear that the party had taken on the historical legacy at least on a symbolic level (continuing in the pre-February 1948 tradition, policies, and social democratic leaders; resuming the numbering of party congresses after November 1989, etc.).

The pre-war tradition was the basis in the first years of its existence for Hungary’s Independent Small Farmers’ Party (FKGP), which continued in the tradition of the successful party of the same name from the 1930s. The same goes for the Christian Democratic Party of Lithuania (LKDP).

The second category consists of parties for which the past is a burden, especially where this becomes a source of conflict between members oriented towards the party's historical legacy, and new members who call for change in light of external circumstances. Some parties have succeeded in coping with conflicts of this sort. For others it was the cause of their downfall, as with the Hungarian Social Democratic Party. Similar problems were faced by the Czechoslovak Socialist Party, which despite a good starting position soon became marginalized due to internal conflicts. Despite the examples mentioned, what is worthy of notice is the relatively small number of „historic” parties that have been able to find a stable place in the political spectrum in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

The new political parties

Several of the new political parties were formed by relatively small groups of political activists who were originally elected to parliament on the ballots of the citizen forums. Activists during the course of their first experience in legislative or executive office became aware of the necessity to accommodate a more diverse array of opinion than was possible within the forums' heterogeneous structure. This was one of the motives for the founding of the new political parties, although there were other factors involved as well, including the personal ambitions of individuals. The parties emerging on the level of the parliamentary elites commonly bore all the indicators pointed out by Maurice Duverger⁹. One of these was weak identification by social groups with parties emerging in this way.

The initiating group, usually made up of some parliamentary elite, had difficulty creating a coherent and sufficiently large **internal organization** with a stable hierarchical structure, clearly defined positions of party leadership, regional and local structures, and a professional administrative and managerial apparatus.

It is illustrative to compare the consequences of the existence/absence of organizational structures in the two main political groups that came out of the Civic Forum: the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), and the Civic Movement (OH). The weakness of the Civic Movement was the diversity of opinion among its members; moreover the movement rejected the traditional party structure, and for a time even had a system of collective membership. All together these were factors making it difficult to win identification by a larger group of voters. This was reflected in the party's defeat in elections to the Czech National Council in 1992, when it failed to get over the 5 % mandate threshold (with only 4,6 %).

⁹ M. Duverger, *Political Parties*, New York 1965.

Conclusion

If we are to summarize the main factors influencing the process of institutionalization of political parties in the post-communist countries, we must begin with the initial **insufficient crystallization of interests**, which hindered the creation of stable relationships between the parties and social groups. Voter loyalty was also weakened by the media, which to a certain degree influenced the relationship between voters and the candidates of political parties. In societies where the system was un-structured at the beginning, parties had a hard time trying to figure out where to target their message, and what ideological/policy program to promote. Attila Agh calls parties premature catch-all parties; these parties attempt to represent the interests of the entire society. However, this cost many parties their identity, and made them less attractive to potential supporters.

Another important factor was the **political system** selected involving the head of state. In presidential systems the political parties have much less influence on executive political power, and their roles is much smaller than in parliamentary systems. From this standpoint the new European democracies tended to give stronger rather than weaker roles to the political parties. The exceptions were some of the post-Soviet countries, which adopted presidential systems; and the Russian Federation as well. Another exception of a kind was Poland, which in the early 1990s inclined towards a stronger role for the president, when Polish president Lech Walesa, after parliamentary elections in 1993 won by the left, attempted to install a presidential system with authoritarian elements. His efforts were unsuccessful, and Walesa lost his re-election bid as president in 1995.

Also working against quicker institutionalization of the new political parties in Poland was the fact that the first truly free elections (1990) were presidential elections, not parliamentary. This was important because parliament is one of the key institutions for the activity of political parties.

In the process of democratic transition another factor was the **electoral system** chosen, which has a fundamental influence of the form of party system. The post-communist countries opted for proportional electoral systems, which did not make high demands on the existence and activities of political parties. Predominant was the principle of proportionality not limiting the entry of parties into parliament, and allowing citizens to vote their precise political preference; the result was a greater number of relevant political parties. The electoral system has a much greater influence on the form of party system, but also impacts how many new political parties are created. The establishment of an electoral mandate threshold (for parties and coalitions) affects the integration of political forces, the formation of political parties, their development, and their viability. Getting over the mandate threshold meant a major institutionalization of the party, at minimum in terms of acquiring financial and material resources.

In some of the post-communist countries the form of the new electoral system was the result of negotiations between officials of the former regime and the anti-communist opposition. Trying to understand the form of the first electoral systems in the post-communist countries reminds us of the democratic processes around the turn of the 20th century. At that time as well the „old” forces faced a challenge from the new political forces that were seeking a place in the political system. The logic of the „division of power” led both the old and new political forces to seek the most suitable compromise solution; thus the proportional system was the most frequent choice. Illustrative was the example of Hungary and the complex motivations driving both the „old” and „new” political forces, which finally agreed on a complicated combination of proportional and majority system. The newly founded parties relied on the popularity of the opposition activists and personalities of the transformation; thus they supported the majority system elements which gave the advantage to individual candidates in single-mandate districts. Paradoxically, these majority elements were also supported by the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party (later the Hungarian Socialist Party), which wanted to take advantage of the popularity of some of its politicians from the former regime¹⁰. On the other hand the „historic” parties that (re-established themselves) counted on voters identifying with the party name and not particular candidates. Thus it was no surprise that they supported the proportional elements of the system linked with the multiple-mandate electoral districts.

An important element from an organizational standpoint, but also as an indicator of increased legitimacy for a party, as a representation of social interest, is the **size of its membership**. The new democracies saw little interest in society in political party membership. A number of factors were at work here. One of them was the reserved attitude on the part of most of society in party membership as a result of the communist past, when membership in „the Party” was a priori seen negatively. Competing with the political parties were the civic movements, which capitalized on the public’s distrust of the party model of politics. The situation was best illustrated by the campaign slogan of the Czech Civic Forum for the first free elections in 1990: *Parties are for partisans; the Civic Forum is for everyone*. The concept of non-political politics in the early 1990s clearly weakened the first phase of the institutionalization of political parties, especially in Czechoslovakia and Poland.

In the post-communist countries the **changes in external circumstances** were so great that it was impossible to build the mass-based parties given by Panebianco as examples of highly institutionalized political parties. The countries of Central

¹⁰ The popularity of the Hungarian Socialists was the result of election reforms in 1985. The communist regime in Hungary tried to increase the legitimacy of the elections by allowing voters to select from more than one candidate within the limited range of competition; which stimulated the candidates’ activity towards the voters. The victors became popular, and made use of their popularity during the new democratic transition.

and Eastern Europe, despite their long communist history, showed signs of modern society with individualized social structures, relatively high economic standard, and the presence of modern mass media. It is clear then that the mass party model is historically a thing of the past. In the Czech Republic the KSČM and KDU-ČSL most clearly approached the model of the mass party as historic parties with previously-existing organizational structures reaching back to the founding of the Czechoslovak state, interrupted only by the era of the Second World War. Despite declining numbers in recent years, the parties still have strong membership bases which set them apart from parties founded or re-established after 1989.

Political parties in the post-communist countries thus do not have strong party organizations with large numbers of members, and it is likely that in the long term they will not make strong efforts to build them. This is because the large Czech parties, for example the ODS and ČSSD, are mainly dependent on voters, and not on members, who comprise only 1-2 % of their votes¹¹. This confirms the hypothesis of G.W. Lewis that parties in the post-communist countries will postpone the building of strong organizations in order to concentrate on winning votes¹². Attila Agh is even of the opinion that the Central European parties have carried over the cartel model of parties according to the theories of Richard Katz and Peter Mair, or are inclining in that direction. The parties have undergone their own kind of institutionalization, which separated them from society when they had to very quickly pass from being civic movements with loose organization to precisely-organized cartel-type governing parties, reflecting the new division between parties and societies¹³.

Streszczenie

Tomáš Jarmara

Instytucjonalizacja postkomunistycznych partii politycznych

Celem artykułu jest analiza procesu instytucjonalizacji partii politycznych w krajach postkomunistycznych w procesie demokratycznej tranzycji. Instytucjonalizacja jest na ogół definiowana jako proces, w którym partie polityczne stają się „objektywną”, oczywistą i społecznie uznaną częścią systemu politycznego. Analiza dotyczy procesu instytucjonalizacji czeskich partii politycznych w porównaniu

¹¹ L. Linek, *České politické strany a jejich členové. K postupné proměně charakteru členství*, [in:] J. Kabele, M. Potůček, I. Prázová, A. Veselý (eds.), *Rozvoj české společnosti v Evropské unii I – Sociologie, prognostika a správa*, Praha 2004, pp. 174-192.

¹² G. P. Lewis, *op.cit.*, p. 58.

¹³ A. Agh, *The Politics of Central Europe*, London-Thousand Oaks-New Delhi 1998, p. 107.

z partiami innych państw postkomunistycznych i opiera się na klasycznej już dziś koncepcji instytucjonalizacji partii politycznych Angela Panebinaca.

Tomáš Jarmara – dr, adiunkt w Katedrze Nauk Społecznych Wydziału Nauk Pedagogicznych Uniwersytetu Ostrawskiego oraz w Katedrze Nauk Społecznych Wyższej Szkoły Górniczej – Uniwersytecie Technicznym w Ostrawie (Republika Czeska).