Eastern European Parties – a Dystopic View in Western Europe’s future?¹

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Introduction
Since the beginning of transition in Eastern Europe, the emergence and development of political parties has been an issue for academic and practitioners alike. One recurring argument is that we cannot depict working representative democracies without political parties. This was one of Epstein’s considerations in the last 1960s when he declared that parties are not a sufficient but necessary condition for democracies (1967: 8). A short exploration of the situation at hand substantiates this claim. Thus, reality is more complex than theoretical assumptions. Even after 27 years of transition, we still struggle with research on political parties in Eastern Europe. They resemble their counterparts in the West but there is something confusing and unfamiliar about them.

Bulgaria is a good example for the strange fabric of political parties. The Bulgarians voted for very diverse options, a former king and also a bodyguard have been elected prime ministers. Also the Lithuanian case is confusing with a Labor party that has ironically been founded by a very versatile businessman. Parties in governments have vanished completely in subsequent elections (such as Poland, the Czech Republic and Romania) or they are completely marginalized. Parties and movements appear out of nowhere and gain impressive electoral success, sometimes even important government function, such Andrei Babiš in the Czech Republic or, without government function We are family in Slovakia, formed by Boris Kollár. Major and minor scandals shake the fundament of these political systems, very often linked to corruption allegation, plagiarism or plain incompetence. A new dimension has been introduced over the last years as governments question whether democracy is the “only game in town” (Linz and Stepan 1996). The case of Viktor Orban’s illiberal democracy in Hungary and recent events in Poland demonstrate quite clearly these new tendencies.

This article inquires to what extend political parties in Eastern Europe can be seen as a trendsetter to developments in Western Europe (Segert 2010:40) and as a laboratory to detect

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future problems. This paper deals with a straightforward question: what functions do parties in Eastern Europe fulfil? What does this tell us about trends for parties and democracies in the West? This article is organized as follows: first, I will present the thesis of Eastern Europe as a trendsetter in political party development. Secondly, I will discuss the functions of political parties as presented in political party research before turning to new discussions and challenges.

In contrast to prevalent understandings, this approach does not perceive Eastern Europe as being in the position of catching up with the West, while still displaying various deficits. The situation in Eastern Europe is regarded as unique, as a result of specific historical, cultural and contemporary developments. Translating this to party research means thirdly, that I try to give answers to the question to what extend new, very specific functions of parties have emerged in this region. Therefore, I analyze research on political parties in Eastern Europe according to this new perspective.

**Eastern Europe: Trendsetter or Laggard**

The transition of Eastern Europe has somehow primarily been discussed as a catch-up development. In this sense, researchers tried to adapt or transplant existing theories to the new context. Caught up in the idea of the “end of history” as outlined by Francis Fukuyama (1992), it was expected that all these countries would become eventually representative democracies. Only few voices raised concerns and imagined different possible scenarios.

Dieter Segert for example, stressed already in 1994 that party research must be advanced by theory but at the same time sensitive to contextual factors, such as the legacy of communism, historical and cultural traits and, the profound effect of the changed ownerships structures (Segert and Machos 1995). He feared that next to the positive notion of liberalization, democratization and consolidation as outlined by transition-to-democracy researchers, other paths might have been possible: normalization, stagnation or catastrophe (Segert and Machos 1995: 204f.).

The perspective on political parties as an – in an extreme case – result of contingency is not entirely new and can be found in the classical literature on parties (Duverger 1963, Sartori 1976: 27). Accordingly, it comes quite as a surprise to measure the success of Eastern Europe parties along the lines whether they resemble their Western European counterparts.
Most scholars assume at the same time that these are more similar than converging. This is even more alarming as this argument does not always take into account that debates about altercations and even crisis of political parties in the West. These have already started as early as the 1980s and were on the rise ever since (Crotty/Jacobson 1980 for the US, Dalton/Kuechler 1990, Crouch 2004 und Mair 2013).

One common explanation for these developments refers to structural reasons such as socio-economic change that has impacted traditional constituency. Moreover, ideological/programmatic convergence of parties is attributed to a reduced room to maneuver due to globalization and/or EU integration. Others mention the loss of communication between citizens and parties and successive loosening ties.

Even though, the emergence of party systems in the East and party crisis are not discussed completely disconnected from each other, they have hardly challenged the perspective on Eastern Europe as a deficit version of Western Europe undergoing all steps of party development in fast forward. The Status Quo in the “East” is still described by using the changed West as a blueprint (see Webb/White 2007). One approach presumes that parties undergo more or less all phases of party development (in an accelerated speed) while another one assumed that an evolutionary leap is very likely (Smith 1993) in the sense that parties might skip certain elements, such as the period of mass parties and resemble quickly modern political parties. Thus, there is a common understanding that party systems in East and West have undergone substantial change. How the result is interpreted depends primarily on the observer.

Van Biezen, for example, sees a difference between old and new democracies (independent of the area) “in degree rather than in kind”(van Biezen 2005: 169) while she highlights that the process of emergence and development is disconnected from each other. Like van Biezen, most of the party researchers do not conceptualize Eastern Europe as one specific region. They differentiate between “old” and “new” democracies, mapping the regimes on the axis between autocracy and democracy. Only few try to conceptualize Eastern Europe as one specific region in which a new quality of parties have evolved because of the particular post-socialist transition. A very unusual perspective is that of Eastern Europe as a trendsetter:

“In some areas of the political change we can observe that the “East” has become a trendsetter for more general developments. The problems of democracy and the critical development that
I have highlighted by looking at Eastern European parties must be expected for the West. (….) The Eastern European phenomenon of weak mass integration parties, low membership rates and weak connections between parties and society should not be interpreted as a process of catching up. It has started later but then developed more radical than in the West, resulting in a transformation to a new form of party organization, to a new type of party” (Segert 2008a: 29f).

This perspective – Eastern Europe as a laboratory for trends – only recently entered the more traditional comparative research on political parties. Thus, here the focus is on the adaption of general valid theories about parties and effects on party systems (Haugton/Deegan-Krause 2015; Rovny 2015). They do not aim to describe a region as such by identifying factors that are unique for the context. They rather want to identify trends that ultimately can be discussed in large cross-country comparisons so that regional aspects lose their explanatory relevance. These are two distinct approaches of the laboratory thesis.

The legacy of post-socialism is still affecting these political regimes: the implementation of functioning democratic institutions and, even more important, practices have not come to an end. The fundamental change of the economic order has produced new ownership structures and a very uneven redistribution of resources. Inequality has sparked. People observe the growing discrepancy between more political and less socio-economic equality. It affects also their reflection on democracies and might lead to a “retreat from politics” (Segert 2010: 32). This dilemma of simultaneity (Offe 1991) of political and economic change proves to be unique for post-socialist countries. It leaves a trait on party systems as well. Besides this, external factors such as globalization affect both, East and West, and will be discussed with regard to party systems below.

**Functions of Political Parties in Eastern Europe**

*Functions of Political Parties*

Sartori’s motivation to write about political parties was primarily influenced by his assessment that Duverger’s book (1951 french original; 1963 english translation) left important elements unanswered. But by the time his book was published in 1976 – 25 years later – he was much more moderate, admitting that he alike, failed to write the theory on
political parties as he intended to do. His contribution to the question of the functions of political parties remains vague: “What parties are for – that is, what their function, placement, and weight in the political system are – has not been designed by a theory but has been determined by a concurrence of events” (Sartori 1976: 18).

Party research concentrates on change of political parties, new types, new organizational forms and political competition. The general understanding of the functions of political parties within modern democracies remains unchallenged. One can presume that we still aspire a clear theoretical grounding and an implicit normative approach to political parties. While officially, we look at parties from an empirical perspective, trying to find patterns that can be generalized and thus theorized, we accredit them with functions they ought to play. So first, we identify these functions and then we turn to Eastern Europe to see if there are identifiable patterns of alternative function. Table 1 presents functions that are mentioned in standard references. It is surprising to find that these functions are not described very elaborate by most of the authors. They are listed rather than explained.

Interest aggregation and articulation are mentioned in the same breath in most studies, even though they highlight two distinct aims. The aggregation of interest is based on collecting, filtering and bundling of interests that are discussed in society. Together with intermediary organizations such as unions, lobbying groups and non-governmental organizations and citizens, parties try to identify societal problems that await political action. This bottom-up approach of collecting and organizing interest in society presents a key function of parties. Ideally, it results in a broad consensus within society and outlines the general direction of policies (Sartori highlights this function in 2005 and calls it societal integration). Others stress that not consensus but programmatic differentiation of parties is the intended result (Mair 2013).

The articulation of interest is, thus, a genuine different function. Parties articulate their ideas, present, if applicable, own policy options or solutions to identified problems. They try to convey their approaches to a larger public and convince the electorate of their approaches. It is a top-down communication with segments of society. If possible, interest articulation finds its way into party manifestos and outlines the general ideological direction of a party.
Table 1: Functions of Political Parties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Goal Attainment</th>
<th>Articulation of Interests</th>
<th>Aggregation of Interests</th>
<th>Recruiting</th>
<th>Governing</th>
<th>Communication and beyond</th>
<th>Participation</th>
<th>Diverse</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Duverger 1951/1954</td>
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<td>Almond 1960*</td>
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<td>Epstein 1967</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jupp 1968</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<td>Sartori 1976</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Von Beyme 1985</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>Gunther/Diamond 2001</td>
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<td>Webb et al 2002</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<td>Sartori 2005</td>
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*Most authors refer to Almond as a quite extensive list of functions of political parties. Thus, he describes the functions of a political system and not parties as such. He exemplifies the function of interested aggregation by looking at political parties in different settings.

According to most scholars, recruiting (or patronage) is another function of parties. Its functional logic is that parties want to send reliable and loyal party activists in politico-administrative positions to ensure a certain congruence between party positions and political function. Parties socialize their future office-holders. The term patronage is also used and refers to a more problematic network of dependency and favoritism. The office is a reward for unconditional and constant party activism, not a safeguard mechanism for the quality of the office holder.
The fourth recurring function is governing. Ideally, parties take over the government after undergoing interest aggregation and articulation and take political decisions in line with their electorate and they also control the process of implementation.

Other functions do not gain much consensus among political party scholars, such as the role of parties in political education (as addressed as a core function in the German party law and pursued by political foundations for example) and social integration. Mobilization of voters and encouraging political participation of citizens are not always included in the catalog of party functions. These last elements are of uttermost importance for almost any democratic theory; hence, it is surprising to find them as nice add-ons to the functions of political parties.

As already mentioned, these functions are not necessarily understood as normative but we could say, some of them might still be more wishful thinking than established democratic practices. Recent debates of party scholars deal with the question to what extend parties do not or cannot fulfil these functions any longer.

Mair (2013) and Sartori (2005) have addressed the issue in the sense that they re-evaluate the ascribed functions. It is unexpected that Sartori’s approach is primarily a normative one. His conclusion is that parties cannot substitute their representative function (election, electioneering and expression), while Mair states the opposite from an empirical perspective. The procedural functions (such as governing) are still fulfilled while parties are moving away from society and towards the state. He explicitly refers to Western or Western-like democracies and we can presume that he includes post-socialist EU member states. So while one scholar stresses representation as a core element, the other author has given up on it. Webb/White (2007) deal with a similar question with regard to “young” democracies and come to an ambivalent result. Thus, their overall outlook is positive: “(…) nonetheless in every case parties make important contributions to the governance, recruitment, articulation, and aggregation functions, albeit not without challenges and constraints“ (2007: 368).

If we combine the question of change to the above mentioned idea of external factors that attribute to these changes, it is insightful to combine Mair’s idea of changing functions with Colin Crouch’s idea of Post-Democracy (2005).

Colin Crouch’s essay on post-democracy has stirred an interesting debate about the state of representative democracy in West European countries. Post-democracy is a critical assessment of the effects of neoliberalism on these societies and the institutional setting.
These societies have passed their ‘democratic moment’, the peak of democracy in the 1970s, and face now a constant process of deterioration. This paper uses post-democracy as an analytic concept, also including new post-socialist EU member states. Thus, these countries can be understood as post-democratic, even though they skipped the democratic moment (similar to the evolutionary leap thesis for parties), as they were immediately exposed to the neoliberal transformation while democratic institutions were still in the making and weak.

Post-democracy describes a process where democratic institutions formally exist but have lost their power and relevance while a small political and economic elite has taken over the decision-making process.

As already mentioned, one (uncontested) function of parties is the recruitment of office holders and political leaders. Declining numbers of party members also reduce considerably the recruitment pool and forces parties to look elsewhere. This might result in a reduced commitment by candidates vis-à-vis parties and can foster political patronage (Mair 2013: 95). However, not only the recruitment of personnel for top-level functions is problematic; there is also a lack of partisans willing to work voluntarily in times of electoral campaigns. A stronger reliance on mediatized and professionalized campaigns can substitute partisan involvement but once again results in higher costs. Nevertheless, Mair draws the conclusion that the organization of parliaments through parties is still functioning but that parties have “become agencies that govern – in the widest sense of the term – rather than represent” (Mair 2013: 97). According to Crouch (2004), political parties surrender governments and governing to global firms. He observes a shift from parliament as the place for political decision-making to backrooms where politicians and firms meet, out of sight of popular control. Firms recruit therefore politicians or place employees in relevant ministries.

Furthermore, political parties are supposed to articulate and aggregate interests (Mair 2013: 89). Mair sees this function in decline as parties shy away from controversies and opt to represent governments. According to Crouch, the aggregation of interest is turned into a technical operation by the excessive use of opinion polls. In order to do so, they need firms that seek political influence and are willing to finance political parties (Crouch 2004: 74). Consequences are, that the dependency on economic resources is growing and political contestation is de-politicized as debates are substituted by polls or as Mair argues for the 1990s by experts: “As far as politics was concerned, and perhaps even as far as the democratic process more generally was concerned, experts reason was deemed superior to
interests” (Mair 2013: 6). Once political decision-making becomes a purely bureaucratic act, there is no need to aggregate interests. The incorporation of experts into the political process transforms politics into a neutral, de-politicized procedure of finding ‘objectively’ the best solutions. Moreover, regulatory agencies take over the decision-making process, transferring it from a political contestation to legal procedure. The decision-making process of the EU can be seen as a classical example for that. Crouch goes even further by referring to ‘advisors’ and ‘lobbyists’ within parties, drawing attention to the economic interests that stand behind these presumably neutral experts as well as the interchanging positions in parties and firms the same people hold (Crouch 2004: 7). The changes in the need to aggregate interests has brought a change in strategies: opinion-polls substitute the communication with members and groups, the fiction of good governance and expert-based policies substitutes political conflict, while experts and lobbyists take over party structures.

It seems to be uncontested that political parties have changed tremendously over the last 20-30 years, in terms of functions as well as organizational structure. We have discussed their deficits, taking the perspective on Western democratic parties. We have not discussed, however, what other functions they have incorporated. Taking Eastern Europe as a laboratory, where specific developments can be seen more clearly, we try to identify functions of political parties by reflecting on the existing literature.

**Functions of Parties in Eastern Europe**

Aggregation has been deleted from the functions without substitution. Interest aggregation has no priority at all in Eastern Europe. Data that compares old and new democracies highlight that there is only little interaction between citizens and parties (Karp/Banducci 2007) while this trend is more pronounced in Eastern Europe compared to other new democracies. Intermediate organizations such as unions have no relevance and could not rebuild any kind of relationship with its traditional clientele (Crowley 2002). In general, unions have lost their impact as people perceive them as compromised for primarily collaborating with state-socialist systems. In the transition period of the 1990s where the economic restructuring resulted in rising unemployment rates, unions had basically no impact on these changes. In most countries the number of union members dropped during transition (except for Poland).
Table 2: percentage of respondents who are not members in labor unions

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>93</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>93</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>93</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>87</td>
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<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>91</td>
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<tr>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

World Values Survey, post-socialist EU-members with more than one survey on the issue

The emerging civil society is seen ambivalent as well and people do not engage for various reasons (Howard 2002). The growing distrust of citizens vis-à-vis parties and low membership is also clearly documented (Ceka 2013). Thus, there is a missing institutionalized link between citizens and parties. Some argue that due to socio-economic hardship at the beginning of transition and in parts even today have let to the retreat of citizens from politics (Segert 2010). Others highlight that during state-socialism there was a certain obligation or pressure to engage with intermediate organizations. People enjoy now the freedom not to engage (Howard 2002). Another common argument relates to the capability of citizens to engage. After a long period of autocratic reign, people have to learn how to engage in democratic societies (Merkel 2010). Their initial non-engagement was deemed preferable as citizens might make unrealistic demands and pressure political actors in potentially harmful concessions.

This goes in line with already mentioned factors such as the limited room to maneuver due to external constraints. The specific post-socialist element is the undisputable political and economic agenda of transformation, amplified by the processes of EU-accession (for European Neighborhood Policy countries not accession but convergence) and globalization. Translated into the function of parties this means that aggregation was not on the agenda. It has never really evolved actually and there was no declared political will to do so. Van Biezen (2005: 156) comes to a similar conclusion with regard to membership and local embedding of citizens in young democracies. This “memberlessness” opens new rooms of maneuver for parties that we need to reflect on. Parties do not have to interact or react to
demands made by citizens. Responsiveness and accountability are not relevant as parties do not face powerful intermediate actors and they do not face citizens’ demands within parties or in society at large (see for responsiveness and accountability Carey/Reynolds 2007: 271). Parties produce therefore volatility, they are not necessarily victims of an erratic electorate. Some argue that the preference of the voters remain rather constant but parties lack to offer a clear and long-term programmatic identity and ideological orientation (Tavits 2008: 548f). They are sending arbitrary messages and have lost credibility, thus it expands their ability to act (de Nève 2008: 294). We can take Romania as an example where the Democratic Party (PD) with origins in the communist-ruled umbrella organization National Salvation Front turned over night from a social-democratic party to a conservative party, also changing the affiliation on the European level. Then again, out of a power calculation, they added liberalism to its name (PDL) and only recently fused with one other liberal party. The party leadership decides all these fusions. Single MPs are even more unreliable as they migrate from party to party and parties have no reservation to accept these new members (Olteanu 2008). In contrast to the more prevalent theses that Eastern European parties do fulfill the function of aggregation but rather more limited, I argue that parties do not even see a need to engage in interest aggregation and do not define this as their function. Weak intermediate organization and loose ties to the electorate leave them disconnected to society and this has not been challenged so far. A positive sign that might bring a new dynamic to the citizen-party relations is that recent protests have sparked. They take place in many Eastern European countries. People have been demonstrating in Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, Hungary and even Bosnia and Hercegovina. One underlying message is that they do not support the corrupt and unaccountable elite anymore. Thus, they have been criticized for not presenting new political solutions or reasonable demands; we can at least see that people reclaim the political sphere by taking the protest to the streets. While this might be not a constructive, at least it brings long lost pressure on parties. They are repeatedly to position themselves on issues aggregated by protesters.

From articulation to enactment

The articulation of interest by political parties is of importance to them. Sartori (1976: 25) problematized this aspect, as he perceives interest articulation as abetting manipulation of the public option. This holds especially true when the “two-way communication channel”
bottom-up and top-down (or as we use it here aggregation and articulation) displays functional deficits. He views party pluralism as a safeguard mechanism that prevents negative effects resulting from manipulation attempts.

However, the articulation of interests in political programs and actual policies differ as well. Studies find on the one hand, that parties in Eastern Europe do not act on a conventional left-right scale: “leftist parties are more likely to pursue rightist policies of fiscal responsibility and economic reform than the rightist parties themselves” (Tavits/Letki 2009: 566) while rightist parties turn to conservative positions on socio-cultural issues. The authors explain this by socialist legacies and political constraints. Still, the articulation of interest might not match actual (economic) policies. Thus, even if parties articulate interest this does not necessarily mean that they are pursuing these interests once they are in power. In some societies though, the ideological boundaries between parties are very clear and stable, such as Hungary or Poland where some parties engage primarily in identity politics.

It is also significant to look at the process by which parties articulate their interest and communicate those to a larger public. As the link between citizens and parties is only rudimentary, classical forms of communication (publications by parties, meetings, newsletter etc.) have only a limited impact on citizens. Media (especially TV and radio) has become more important. We need to shift our focus to the connection between media and parties. Access to media, financing of media through state resources as well as control over the media are dimensions that clarify the quality of interest articulation. “In most cases political elites take control of the media to serve their own interests” concludes Voltmer her analysis on transitional democracies (Voltmer 2013: 174). This is a different approach in comparison to works on media and democracy in Western democracies. Researchers on Western democracies highlight that politics has adapted to the logic of media. Messages are presented as easy-to-deal with media statements that can be integrated in a 20 second original comment in a TV news show, choosing mediagenic candidates has become important and public deliberation takes place in talk shows. Meyer observes how politics is colonized through media and politics is changed in politainment (Meyer 2001). Parties and politicians want to please media and hope to improve their visibility through adapting to the logic of entertainment and high speed.

The relation between politics and media in Eastern Europe is more symbiotic; it is an exchange relation: (state) resources for press coverage. Parties use different strategies to
colonize media: they send loyal people in relevant positions within the public media sector in order to exercise control over public service broadcasting authorities. Only recently, the rules themselves have become subject to political interference, further cementing the control of governments over the public service broadcasting. The 2015 and ongoing developments in Poland’s law on media hint to that direction. Hungary has experienced a backslide in this regard already since 2010 according to Freedom House (2015).

Furthermore, private media receive indirect or direct state subventions through advertisement or project money (see Bajomi-Lázár 2015: 77f). Even though politicians are skeptical regarding the effectiveness of these actions, they still do not change these patterns (see Bajomi-Lázár 2013). They observe that citizens/viewers/readers are more and more aware of the underlying political power games and dependencies. For most Eastern European countries, surveys show as an overall tendency that the confidence in the press is in decline, sometimes very dramatic. While in Poland 46 percent of the respondents had (a great deal or quite a lot of) confidence in the press at the beginning of the 1990s this has dropped to 27 percent after 2010. Slovenia sees a decline from 50 percent to 23 percent (World Values Survey Wave 2 and Wave 6).

Still, political parties create a dominant position vis-à-vis media and can influence reporting, thus interest articulation. Only recently, Andrei Babiš and his party ANO demonstrated the relevance of media access when he bought a media outlet just before elections.

Slovakia’s new party We are Family - Boris Kollár has profited from the publicity of its leader in the tabloid press. Boris Kollár also owns a radio station and receives more than 1 Mio Euro from state advertisement. Of course, it is not an exclusive Eastern European phenomenon, as most sophisticated case of the colonization of media is Silvio Berlusconi in Italy. Also the former Austrian Prime Minister Faymann was under severe pressure for his spending on advertisements for state-run companies in the tabloid press during his time as Minister of Infrastructure – expecting favorable media coverage. While these cases in the West can be linked primarily to individual persons, studies for Eastern Europe demonstrate that we are dealing with well-established and widespread patterns.

This leads us to the second thesis. The widespread complex and symbiotic nature of media and political parties show that parties are not so much interested in articulating their positions but in dominating press reporting by changing the rules, by creating dependency of private media on state subsidiaries and by ownership of media outlets by parties. This way...
they can convey a specific narrative and change it if necessary. Entertainment is important, content relative. It is about the enactment of interests in a more or less controlled setting. The ownership structure of media will be discussed under the gatekeeper function.

**Recruitment as a cost-benefit calculation**

Recruitment works very differently in Eastern Europe from what we expect from party research. Recent discussions within Western European political actors and scholars center on the question how to make party membership more attractive to citizens. It seems that they have not given up the idea that parties are built on top of an active, engaged citizenry. The new ideas imagine strategies of short-term, issue-based political engagement of interested citizens as compared to a life-long membership. The Pirate parties are one example; they do not only tackle challenges of digital societies but also digital interest aggregation without clear membership structures. Other party formations with an altogether different, opposed ideological approach such as NEOS in Austria or Podemos in Spain strive for new forms of citizens’ engagement in party politics.

The tendency in Eastern Europe points to the opposite direction. It seems that membership is not a high priority as it goes hand in hand with empowerment and internal control. The Czech party ANO primarily concentrates on followers and sympathizers while the recruit public persons or persons that have demonstrated loyalty before. Andrei Babiš recruited people form this company and his brother, Boris Kollár his half-brother and also his ex-girlfriend. Quasi family-like relations and networks are important in Romania. Choosing a best man for the wedding or a godfather for a child is important for the political career. The wife of former Prime Minister Victor Ponta is a long term MEP while her father used to be one of the most influential people within the Romanian social democratic party. The daughter of the former president Băsescu has been elected to the European parliament, officially as an independent candidate but with strong informal support by the party.

Kopecký/Mair (2012: 361) find that young (primarily Eastern European) parties tend to recruit experts for public office and try to integrate them into the parties. Instead of bottom-up recruitment of potential office holders, experts that hold office are recruited for a more long-term commitment to the parties. This can be found especially in instable party systems where electoral success and defeat are very closely linked to each other. While there is a general trend, differences can be found across countries (Spirova 2012, Meyer-
Sahling/Jager 2012, Volintiru 2014, van Biezen/ Kopeky 2007). Party membership is motivated by specific returns such as material gain, access to state resources or other privileges as it was on the state socialist systems. Parties on the other hand demand loyalty not co-determination (see de Nève 2008: 288f.). The problem with this model of recruitment lies in the cost-benefit calculation. If an offer by a political opponent turns out to be more attractive, loyalty without an ideological commitment is too weak to keep recruits in place.

Parties as gatekeeper to state resources

It seems that a new party function is on the rise for the whole region and is originated on the close relationship between parties, state and economy. Parties turn into gatekeeper for state resources that they can distribute to local and national actors. Some of these actors manage to unite all three dimensions at once: politician, office holder and businessman. Political actors can use their office to promote business interest or businessman enter politics in order to expand their business. In a way, Crouch has sketched how business interests colonize politics but his perspective concentrated on global firms as hard to control actors (Crouch 2004). In Eastern Europe, local and national elites are quite powerful in politics. They do not hide in backrooms, as described by Crouch but are elected members of parliament.

Again, a new and specific functional logic of parties surfaces and its origins can be traced back to a transformed socialist legacy. The interdependence of state management and political parties in state socialism has been described very detailed (Kornai 1992). This structural connection did not disappear after 1989; especially as economic restructuring and privatization were organized and implemented by political actors. Large infrastructure projects also provide a fertile ground for corruption or, more neutral, business opportunities. The most obvious example of this persistent structure are oligarchic networks such as in Ukraine and Russia. But on a smaller scale, they can be found in various countries (see Olteanu 2007 for Romania). Some use the term corruption to deal with these phenomena and address the relevance of personal and party networks (Berend 2007). Innes only recently used the term “corporate state capture” (Innes 2016) to highlight the subordination of political parties under corporations in the Czech Republic, a country that generally is not connected to high levels of corruption, thus with recent corruption scandals. In a more radical interpretation, parties also provide immunity for businessman in distress over corruption.
allegation (Olteanu forthcoming). It might be that for some businesspersons running for office, this could be an interesting side effect. The Bulgarian Deljan Slawtschew Peewski combines actually several elements described so far. He is the son of a politically well-connected mother and owner of a media outlet, since 2009 he is MP, first with the so-called Turkish minority party “Movement for Rights and Freedoms”. Before that he was member of the “National Movement for Stability and Progress” and held various functions within state institutions and government office while being investigate for corruption (e.g. in 2007).

While we have already discussed the role of media for interest aggregation, we want to deepen this aspect by looking at the oligarchic media structures that have evolved after the world economic crisis, according to Štětka (2015). Many international media outlets withdrew from the region as a result of the world economic crisis and local businessmen stepped in. Their motivation is not primarily profit maximizing. Štětka describes how they use the media access and turn it into political capital, which again, can be converted into economic gain.

**Conclusion**

As stated in early work on party systems, parties are a result of specific historical events and constellations. Taking this perspective into account means that Eastern Europe is a specific stand-alone region that needs to be analyzed not only in terms of generalizing patterns of party research but also in terms of unique developments and traits.

This article suggests that Eastern European parties have developed alternative functions of political parties or alternated traditional functions in a way that they formally resemble their Western counterparts but serve a completely different purpose. As Eastern Europe undergoes specific structural developments but is also affected by more general transformations such as globalization or post-democracy we might see, as theorized by Segert 2010, the future of Western societies as well. Eastern Europe might not be catching up with the West; it has taken a front seat in alarming developments that have severe effects on our democratic societies.

Interest aggregation (bottom-up) is not a function, political parties in Eastern Europe perceive as relevant and thus they do not pursue it. Most parties have settled for weak
participatory party structures and low levels of membership\textsuperscript{2}. Moreover, this is embedded in weak intermediate institutions such as labor unions and NGOs. There are no communicative structures in place that would promote a dialog between these separate spheres. But we can consider that it is even more harmful if parties do not problematize this dilemma. While globalization and harmonization within the European Union might be one explanation for whole Europe, Eastern Europe has undergone a political and economic transition closely monitored and influenced by external actors such as the EU and the International Monetary Fund. Politics and governing is presented as a “neutral” de-politicized management task; leaving politics to the sphere of identity politics. What are the effects on society?

Aggregation takes place on the streets. The willingness of citizens to go out and protest is on the rise in most of these societies. It is only a small number of all entitle voters and thus not representative. However, demonstrators in recent years are very powerful and force governments or corrupt politicians to resign (Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia) or at least try (Macedonia). These demonstrators are not apathetic towards politics nor are they apolitical. It is rather a search for alternative channels of interest aggregation, beyond parties and formally established channels. At first glance and as Ivan Krastev argues, these are unproductive, as protesters do no come up with constructive solutions or concrete ideas. They voice dissatisfaction but they do not present new choices (Krastev 2014). An alternative argument is that the street might constitute a new space for interest aggregation. The fact that people engage, meet and discuss politics other than in the private sphere of friends and family can be seen as a positive signal that might give new impulses for the party system. At the same time, it functions as a control mechanism as people demand accountability and responsiveness. In comparison to the West, these protest movements are different from social movements in Western Europe, as they do not fight for leftist values and social change. It seems that they are yearning for serious parties and politicians as they imagined them in 1989. Even in countries with democratic backslide citizens try to reclaim politics, thus in Poland the protest is directed towards the governing party; in Hungary they were primarily issue-based (e.g. internet tax, teachers’ strike). Of course, it is not the majority of citizens; it is a small fraction of active people. Some protesters promote rather nationalistic and

\textsuperscript{2} Thus there are exceptions such as FIDEZ in Hungary, Social Democratic Parties in inherited a strong party organization from the former Communist times (such as Romanian) but these parties do not engage with members in order to aggregate interests in a bottom-up process.
antidemocratic values. Considering the fact that this kind of protest was almost completely absent during the first 20 years of transition, we should at least recognize the change. These protesters are not representative, they do not have a common goal and with regard to the whole society, they are only a few, still they revive the function of interest aggregation.

The second element is the articulation function of political parties in Eastern Europe that resemble more an enactment of politics than transporting information into a larger public. It can be explained by the far-reaching influence of political parties in media or media oligarchs with close political ties. By this symbiotic relation between media and parties, interest articulation has degenerated to a spectacle. The effectiveness of this articulation strategy is questioned by parties themselves, thus it exposes the parties’ approach to citizens as a crowd susceptible to manipulation. Citizens seem to be quite often aware of the biased and politicized media. In the end, it might deepen the mistrust in parties and political actors among citizens. Low rates of party members, low voter turnouts can be interpreted as a realistic assessment of parties and the potential to engage as a citizen. While some take the streets and demonstrate that they are not apolitical or apathetic but rather upset with the political party system. Others vote for radical and populist parties, some out of conviction, and some out of protest.

The reasons for these developments might be those factors that are mentioned in the political party literature: missing cleavage structure or difficult socio-economic conditions for many. Nevertheless, they generally miss to reflect on parties themselves and potential explanations regarding the functioning of parties in Eastern Europe. Citizens play only a minor role. Most parties profit from the combination of politics, state and economy. The low chances of being re-elected in government have let them to move closer to the state and use resources, similar as it is described in the cartel party model. Furthermore, office holders and politicians pursue their self-interest, e.g. using the advantage of information, access to state resources, influencing the political-decision making process for their own profit, and they are protected to a certain degree by immunity. Parties hardly control those activities. The reaction of citizens, thus, varies. In some instances, protests occur and politicians have to step back. In other cases, alleged corrupt or even condemned politicians are voted back into office. To what extend this phenomenon spreads across basically the whole party system or is limited to a view, is difficult to estimate. In highly polarized party systems such as Hungary and Poland, parties might have other functions as those described here. In party systems where parties are
perceived as interchangeable and governments are routinely voted out of office, this pattern seems to be more persistent. In Bulgaria and Romania, common economic interests lead to multiple forms of cooperation or non-interference in relevant matters while political contestation takes place on the symbolic field. This “corporate state capture” (Innes 2016) is especially successful in those cases where accountability and responsiveness have only limited effects.

*Eastern Europe as a trendsetter or laboratory?*

The thesis that Eastern Europe might be rather a trendsetter than a laggard helps to shift the focus from the perceived deficiencies vis-a-vis the West to an assessment of the status quo. We should not expect that Eastern European parties catch-up with Western Europe any time soon, nor should we assume that this is the direction they are heading. Recent literature on the crisis of political parties seems to argue that we can observe rather a convergence. If we assume that the region has undergone specific post-socialist developments next to general transformations such as globalization, we can analyze the party system as an autonomous object of investigation. Thus, it is not completely disconnected from Western Europe. Due to the more direct effects of globalization on Eastern Europe we might see upcoming developments more clearly in these regions (Segert 2010). What does this mean for Western Europe?

We might see how politics is more and more exploited for one’s own economic benefit. In some countries or even on the level of the EU, discussions have started about a waiting period before politicians can take over functions in firms in order to prevent biased political decision-making. In addition, Crouch’s post-democracy idea problematizes economic influence (exercised by global firms) on political processes. In Eastern Europe, the link between economy and politics is much more straightforward. Making economic profit is for many part of the deal of becoming politicians. This trend is aggravated as citizens or society at large and political parties are disconnected from each other. Thus, this uncoupling results in diminished possibilities to control political actors, making it easier to pursue economic interests.

Another trendsetter function is the medialization of politics but not in the sense of Meyer’s adaption to the logic of media by political actors. In Eastern Europe, the economic dependency of media on state resources or media moguls might influence reporting on
politics. Eastern European parties do not seek to convince the electorate through thoughtful programmatic positions and political struggle, not least because of the perceived limited room to maneuver, instead they stage scandals and personalized political conflict as well as engage in symbolic politics. Media might not have the independence to function as control mechanism (idealized in the fourth estate, in addition to the trias politica) but it might profit from the entertainment value of politics. We can see that populist parties, newcomers or dazzling personalities can use such strategies much more effectively than traditional parties can. Thus, it might be important to monitor or reassess the (economic) independence of media.

Overall, all these tendencies in the East do not sketch a very optimistic picture of the future of political parties in Europe. It seems overdue to make a new and realistic assessment about the functions that political parties nowadays actually fulfill as our normative version of its to-do list seems to be outdated or maybe a wish list in the first place. Looking at Eastern Europe might be shattering in a way but recent protests in the region can be interpreted as a game changer.

Literature:


