

# Cleavages in Party Competition in Central and Eastern Europe

## Abstract

While party system volatility remains high in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), less is known about whether electoral competition has become programmatically structured. This paper examines the extent and evolution of programmatic differentiation across four CEE countries, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, and Romania, between the 1990s and 2023. Relying on quantitative content analysis of newspaper coverage during parliamentary election campaigns, it investigates system-level trends in programmatic competition, issue salience, and politicization, as well as party-level patterns of issue salience and entrepreneurship. The results show that programmatic competition is substantial and relatively stable over time, but varies across countries depending on historical legacies and regime trajectories. Cultural conflicts have gained importance, particularly under democratic backsliding. While established parties exhibit routinized and distinct programmatic profiles, new parties expand the issue agenda by politicizing less emphasized conflicts. The findings underscore the continued relevance of cleavage theory for understanding party competition in post-communist Europe.

**Keywords:** *political parties, Central and Eastern Europe, cleavages, programmatic competition, electoral volatility*

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## Introduction

The party systems of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have often been described as volatile and lacking in programmatic structuration. Yet, despite early skepticism about the prospects for democratic consolidation (e.g., Offe, 1991), scholars increasingly highlight the emergence of more structured patterns of party competition in the region. Much of the literature focuses on party system institutionalization (e.g., Casal Bértoa and Enyedi, 2021) or actor-level dynamics (e.g., Bustikova, 2019; Engler, 2023), emphasizing the cyclical nature of party emergence and replacement (Haughton and Deegan-Krause, 2020; Pop-Eleches, 2010). While Emanuele et al. (2020) note signs of a trend toward declining electoral volatility, the magnitude, consistency, and significance of this evolution remain debated. At the same time, recent research points to the crystallization of ideological camps, even as the actors representing them frequently change (Borbáth, 2021; Haughton and Deegan-Krause, 2020; Rovny and Polk, 2017). This suggests that, although individual parties may be short-lived or unstable, the underlying programmatic alignments show continuity.

However, a systematic, long-term assessment of programmatic structuration is still lacking. Content-based approaches that examine the substantive dimensions of party competition remain relatively rare in the CEE context (e.g., Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2009). As a result, it remains unclear whether the convergence in electoral volatility between Eastern and Western Europe (Emanuele et al., 2020) is coupled with a comparable stabilization in the programmatic structure of party competition. This paper takes stock of these developments and examines how programmatic competition unfolds across party systems and parties in CEE.

More specifically, the paper addresses the question: *to what extent are CEE parties programmatically structured?* Applying a cleavage perspective, I empirically focus on party system dynamics as organizational manifestations of cleavages (Bartolini and Mair, 1990; Deegan-Krause, 2013). The analysis examines how programmatic structuration reflects long-term political alignments that may crystallize during critical junctures, based on the idea that crises – such as democratic backsliding – can anchor party competition

around new divides and generate a new equilibrium (e.g., Hutter and Kriesi, 2019). To map the key issues driving cleavage formation and stabilization (Bornschieer, 2010), I analyze programmatic signaling during electoral campaigns in four countries: Hungary (1994–2022), Latvia (1993–2022), Poland (1997–2023), and Romania (1996–2020) (Wang et al., 2025). Electoral campaigns offer a window of observation that allows one to trace the dynamics of salient and politicized conflicts over time (for a similar empirical strategy, see Hutter and Kriesi, 2019; Kriesi et al., 2008). While many studies rely on the well-studied Visegrád countries to draw conclusions about the region, this analysis incorporates two comparatively under-researched cases: Latvia and Romania (for a similar critique, see Binev, 2023). In addition, the selection includes two cases that have experienced autocratizing turns, Hungary and Poland, allowing exploration of how regime dynamics shape programmatic competition.

More specifically, the paper (1) identifies the extent of programmatic competition, (2) maps the most salient and politicized issues, and (3) pinpoints the sources of change by distinguishing between the programmatic offerings of established and new parties. The empirical analysis combines party-system-level dynamics, focusing on programmatic competition, issue salience, and politicization, with party-level variation in issue salience and entrepreneurship (Hobolt and De Vries, 2015). To approximate the interaction between supply- and demand-side dynamics emphasized by cleavage theory (Bornschieer, 2010), I rely on the PolDem-National Election Campaign Dataset (Kriesi et al., 2020), which contains hand-coded newspaper coverage of electoral campaigns across four CEE countries from the mid-1990s to the early 2020s. Unlike expert surveys or party manifestos, this data reflects debates accessible to voters (Merz, 2017). Compared to previous studies, this approach offers four innovations: it examines both established and new parties rather than focusing on specific types like populist or radical right parties (Bustikova, 2019; Engler, 2023); it spans a longer time period than most existing research, which typically begins post-2000 (Hutter and Kriesi, 2019; Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2009; Rovny and Polk, 2017); it employs data more closely aligned with the public information environment (Merz, 2017); and it integrates party-system and party-level analyses in a

unified framework.

The paper makes three main contributions to the existing literature. First, it engages with debates on the level of programmatic party competition by empirically operationalizing the concept and critically revisiting influential expectations formulated in the 1990s (Kitschelt, 1995) in light of the recent dynamic of democratic backsliding. The results partly challenge legacy-based predictions, particularly in the case of Latvia, where programmatic structuration exceeds initial expectations. More broadly, the findings show that, with the notable exception of Romania, CEE party systems largely resemble the level of programmatic competition observed in older Western European democracies. In doing so, the paper contributes a content-based perspective to contemporary debates on party system institutionalization (Casal Bértoa and Enyedi, 2021; Sikk and Köker, 2023).

Second, the paper maps the central programmatic divides in the four CEE countries, contributing to the literature on the salience and politicization of cultural (Bustikova, 2019; Coman, 2017; Hutter and Kriesi, 2019; Marks et al., 2006), economic (Innes, 2014), and political (Engler, 2023) issues. The results show that while political issues remain highly salient, cultural conflicts associated with the new cleavage (Bornschier, 2010; Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Hutter and Kriesi, 2019) are not only salient and politicized but have become increasingly important over time.

Third, the paper analyzes the party-level dynamics of established parties' programmatic differentiation and contributes to the literature on new parties in CEE (Engler, 2023; Haughton and Deegan-Krause, 2020). The findings reveal that established parties adopt distinct programmatic appeals, with limited and issue-specific changes over time. In contrast, new parties expand the programmatic space by emphasizing issues that were previously less politicized. In line with cleavage theory, the emergence of new parties is identified as the main driver of supply-side change (Hooghe and Marks, 2018).

## Theoretical framework

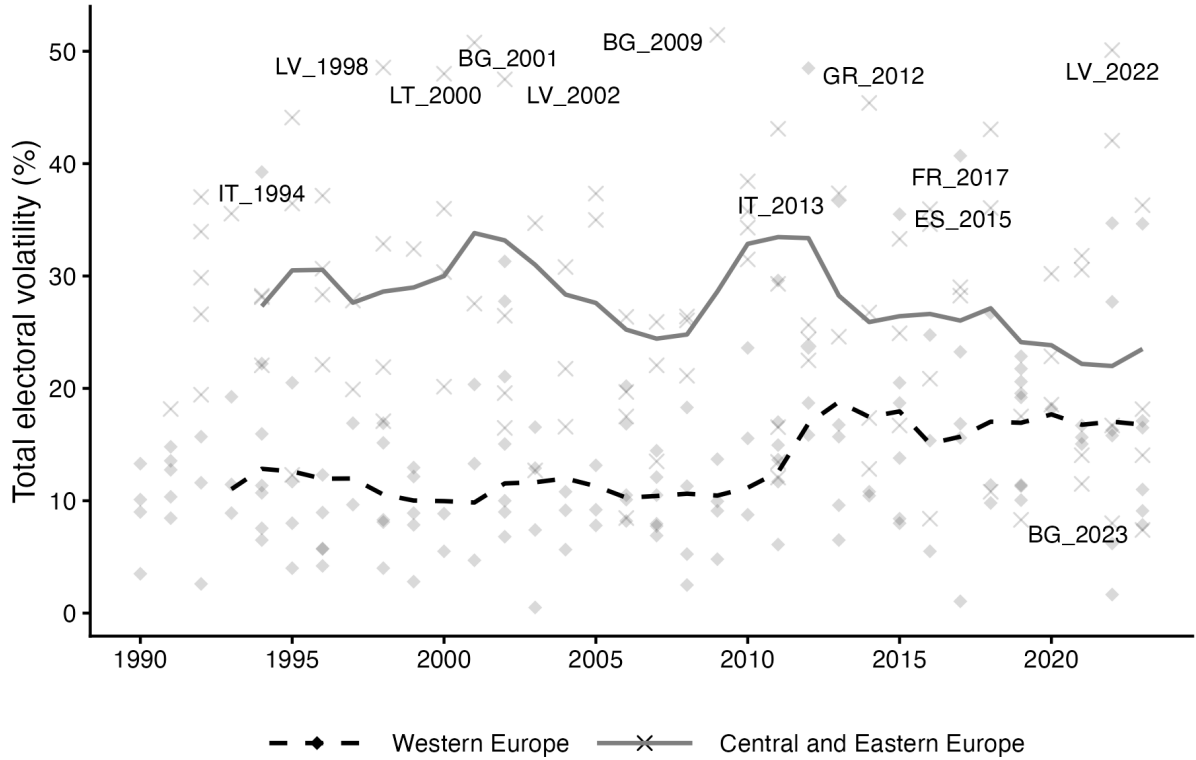
### *Stability amidst instability*

With the advent of democratic elections in CEE after 1989, scholars focused on the prospects for the emergence of stable patterns of party competition. Although, as Enyedi and Deegan-Krause (2018, p. 180) note in their review, *“the study of the parties and voters in Eastern Europe does not yet possess a well-integrated narrative comparable to the one provided by Lipset and Rokkan and others for Western Europe”*, two strands of literature have emerged. The first emphasizes the perils of instability for electoral accountability. In this context, instability primarily refers to organizational transformations (Ibenskas and Sikk, 2017), party replacement (Borbáth, 2021) and government survival rates (Roberts, 2010). This strand sees instability as a driving force behind state capture for private economic purposes (Innes, 2014), often associated with new parties serving the personal ambitions of their founders (Hloušek and Kopeček, 2017). The second strand highlights stability ‘amidst instability’, for example, in the cyclical patterns of new party emergence (Engler, 2023; Haughton and Deegan-Krause, 2020; Tavits, 2008), or even in programmatic structures (Borbáth, 2021; Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2009; Rovny and Polk, 2017). At the same time, it points to the perils of stability, particularly in relation to the threat of democratic backsliding (Rovny, 2023), which is exacerbated by stable governments formed by radicalized established parties that galvanize opposition along a new regime divide (Gessler and Wunsch, 2025).

As previously discussed, both perspectives acknowledge the relatively high level of instability, even if it has been accompanied by more structured patterns. For instance, many new parties continue to emerge, but their appearance follows a cyclical and thus patterned trajectory (Engler, 2023; Haughton and Deegan-Krause, 2020; Pop-Eleches, 2010). Figure 1 illustrates these dynamics through electoral volatility scores, updated to 2023 based on Emanuele et al. (2020). The trend lines represent moving averages by region. Rather than suggesting a linear decline, the figure shows that CEE has entered a phase of stable high volatility. Meanwhile, the volatility gap between Western and

Eastern Europe has narrowed, mainly due to increasing instability in the West and, to a lesser extent, modest stabilization in parts of the East, pointing to a broader regional convergence (Emanuele et al., 2020).

Figure 1: The dynamic of electoral volatility in Europe (1990-2023)



Note: The figure displays electoral volatility at the country-election level across the 27 EU member states, based on the updated dataset of Emanuele et al. (2020). The lines represent regional moving averages, calculated using a window of four elections. Outlier elections are highlighted.

Yet whether this stable high volatility coincides with an over-time stabilization of parties' programmatic supply remains an open question. Data sources are critical for exploring this, but they tend to show partly divergent results (Adams et al., 2019). For instance, Sikk and Köker (2023, pp. 199-219) find that programmatic stability at the party level in CEE is shaped by candidate turnover when measured using data from the Manifesto Project (Lehmann et al., 2023), but not when using the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) (Jolly et al., 2022). Moreover, most data sources operate at the party level and are rarely aggregated to the party-system level (for exceptions, see: Borbáth, 2021; Marks et al., 2006; Rovny and Polk, 2017). Research on party system institutionalization

that explicitly takes a party-system perspective tends to neglect content-based approaches (e.g., Casal Bértoa and Enyedi, 2021).

### *Programmatic linkages*

From a content-based perspective, since the foundational years of the literature, a specific concern has been the formation of programmatic linkages (Kitschelt, 1992, 1995, 2000; Kitschelt et al., 1999; Wineroither and Seeber, 2018). Linkages refer to the connection between elected representatives and the electorate. In their various works, Kitschelt and his collaborators (Kitschelt, 1995, 2000; Kitschelt et al., 1999) conceptualize programmatic linkages as an equilibrium in which parties compete based on distinct conceptions of the public good, and voters choose among them by evaluating their policy proposals. This logic resembles spatial models of party competition (Stokes, 1963).<sup>1</sup>

In the original formulation of this framework, the emergence of programmatic linkages is seen as a function of historical legacies and the post-communist institutional design. Considering the pre-communist heritage, the patterns of communist rule, and the democratic institutional architecture, Kitschelt (1995, p. 457) provides a typology and a ranking of the prospects for programmatic competition in various CEE countries. Table 1 summarizes these considerations in the case of the four countries analyzed here.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Programmatic linkages are analytically distinguished from charismatic and clientelistic linkages. In the case of charismatic linkages, the party builds its appeal around the charisma of a particular leader, and elections become an opportunity for voters to express identification with that person. Clientelistic linkages refer to cases in which the party offers direct compensation or credible promises of such in exchange for electoral support.

<sup>2</sup>The original typology also includes cases classified as bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes, such as the Czech Republic and the former GDR. These cases are excluded here because the analysis focuses on a subset of countries that vary across both legacy types and more recent regime trajectories.

Table 1: Probability of the emergence of programmatic party competition in CEE

		Historical legacies	
		–	+
Constitutional design	–	Legacy: patrimonial-despotic	Legacy: national-accommodative
		Institutions: semi-presidentialism	Institutions: semi-presidentialism
		Case: Romania	Case: Poland
	+	Legacy: $\approx$ national-accommodative	Legacy: national-accommodative
		Institutions: parliamentarism	Institutions: parliamentarism
		Case: Latvia	Case: Hungary

Note: The table shows the probability of programmatic party competition as a function of historical legacies and constitutional design. Based on Kitschelt (1992, 1995).

According to this framework, national-accommodative regimes, such as Hungary and Poland, where communist-era governance allowed for some pluralism, created more favorable conditions for programmatic linkages. When paired with parliamentary systems, especially in the case of Hungary, these legacies support the emergence of party systems where competition is structured by ideological alternatives. In contrast, patrimonial-despotic legacies like Romania’s featured centralized and repressive rule, undermining intermediary structures that might support programmatic appeals. Semi-presidential systems, particularly those with powerful presidents, may further discourage programmatic differentiation by personalizing competition. Latvia, like the other Baltic states, occupies a somewhat ambiguous position. Although it adopted a parliamentary system, it was historically part of the patrimonial Soviet Union. Nevertheless, unlike in other Soviet republics, national movements in the Baltics were permitted and participated in the transition, positioning Latvia as an ambiguous case.

While this framework captures important structural differences, recent developments suggest that historical legacies alone may no longer be sufficient to account for contemporary variation in programmatic competition. In particular, democratic backsliding, as exemplified by Hungary and Poland (e.g., Bernhard, 2021), may alter the conditions under which parties offer programmatically distinct platforms (Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2009). In these contexts, the politicization of political institutions and the justice system,



along with concentrated media control and the use of discretionary spending to benefit government allies, may crowd out ideological differentiation. Compared to these cases, Latvia, despite a more ambiguous classification in legacy terms due to its Soviet past, has not experienced major democratic regression and retains a relatively open political arena (e.g., Agarín and Nakai, 2021). Romania, by contrast, combines unfavorable legacies with relatively limited democratic resilience (e.g., Iusmen, 2015) and programmatic structuration (Borbáth, 2019). In fact, in Romania the key indicator of democratic backsliding (Mechkova et al., 2017), the liberal democracy index, never reaches the same level as in the other three countries, and the country also goes through a less-significant backsliding episode in the second half of the 2010, as captured by the fluctuations of this index (see Appendix A, Figure 1).

Accordingly, I expect that:

*H<sub>1A</sub>: The extent of programmatic competition reflects both legacies and regime trajectories. Countries with less favorable legacies, but without significant democratic backsliding (e.g., Latvia) exhibit higher levels of programmatic competition than those with favorable legacies but democratic erosion (e.g., Hungary, Poland), or structurally weaker systems (e.g., Romania).*

Whereas legacy-based theories have primarily focused on explaining cross-sectional variation, they remain more agnostic regarding over-time dynamics. Kitschelt (1995, p. 452) suggested that the effect of legacies may fade as democratic competition becomes routinized: “the longer the game is played, the greater is the chance that parties will acquire a programmatic profile.” However, empirical findings remain mixed. Some studies based on expert surveys report relatively stable ideological oppositions in the 2000s and early 2010s (Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2009; Rovny and Polk, 2017), suggesting that programmatic structuration may have crystallized during this period. Others, such as Wineroither and Seeber (2018), relying on linkage typologies, point to the persistent weight of legacies despite cumulative democratic experience.

A key source of disagreement originates from the methodological differences across datasets. Most existing measures focus on party-level positions and rarely examine

system-level dynamics over an extended time frame. As a result, they often miss broader patterns of programmatic competition across elections and across parties. According to cleavage theory, once programmatic differentiation becomes institutionalized, it is likely to exhibit relative stability unless disrupted by major political or economic crises (e.g., Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Hutter and Kriesi, 2019). Consequently, the absence of a clear trend over time can itself be theoretically informative, reflecting routinized, though not necessarily deepening, patterns of competition.

*H<sub>1B</sub>: The level of programmatic party competition remains relatively stable over time, with no consistent trend across the four countries.*

### ***Central divides in CEE party competition***

In terms of the issues structuring programmatic party competition, there is broad consensus on the centrality of both economic and cultural dimensions (Coman, 2017; Hutter and Kriesi, 2019; Kitschelt, 1995; Marks et al., 2006; Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2009; Rovny and Polk, 2017). In addition, political issues related to democracy, transition, and corruption have played (Kitschelt et al., 1999) and continue to play (Engler, 2023; Gessler and Wunsch, 2025; Hutter and Kriesi, 2019; Rovny, 2023) a crucial role. However, these issues tend to structure competition as valence, rather than positional, dimensions (Haughton and Deegan-Krause, 2020, p. 130). Despite a growing consensus about the structuring capacity of these three conflict types, their relative importance remains less clearly established.

Due to the historical development of the welfare state preceding conflicts related to immigration, European integration (Kriesi et al., 2008), or transnational dynamics (Hooghe and Marks, 2018), economic conflicts in Western Europe emerged before second-dimension cultural issues. In contrast, in CEE, the simultaneous triple transformation of the economic order, political regime, and, in some cases, state boundaries (Offe, 1991), brought both types of issues onto the party system agenda at the same time. Some authors argue that this led to a regime divide (Kitschelt, 1995), with an axis of competition perpendicular to that in Western Europe (Marks et al., 2006; Rovny and Edwards, 2012). In this

configuration, those favoring gradual transformation and a closed society are represented by a nationalist left, while advocates of economic reform and an open society align with a culturally liberal right. However, this influential account arguably underestimates the secondary role of economic conflict in CEE party competition.

In fact, in several CEE countries, positional conflicts related to resource allocation and the economic order were relatively quickly pacified. This trend can be attributed to the convergence between left- and right-wing parties around market reform and the dismantling of the welfare state (Ost, 2005; Tavits and Letki, 2009). As Coman (2017) shows, due to this economic convergence, parties increasingly emphasized cultural differences. Speculatively, the salience of cultural issues may have been further reinforced by exposure to globalization (Hutter and Kriesi, 2019), especially in contexts where CEE countries had not yet developed the institutional capacity to buffer the economic and cultural forces associated with the transnational cleavage (Hooghe and Marks, 2018).

However, this general dynamic was not uniform across the region. In some countries, economic conflicts remained more pronounced or re-emerged periodically in response to political or economic crises. As Binev (2023) forcefully argues, the type of alignment at the time of market reform constituted a critical juncture. In this context, alignment refers to the ideology of the governing parties and the policies they pursued (for a similar argument, see Roberts, 2014). When left-wing parties implemented market reforms, they opened space for mobilization by culturally conservative forces. In contrast, when right-wing governments undertook market reforms, left-wing parties could preserve their pro-welfare brand.

Rovny (2014) identifies an additional mechanism arising from the interaction between the presence of ethnic minorities and the legacy of communist regimes. In countries with significant ethnic minorities, communist governments could appeal to nationalist sentiments. As a result, the anti-communist right often adopted culturally liberal positions, while left-wing parties tended to inherit nationalist legacies. However, this pattern reverses in cases where the ethnic minority originates from the center of a federal structure associated with the communist regime. In such settings – such as ethnic Serbs in former

Yugoslav republics or ethnic Russians in the Baltic states – the communist government relied on minority support, and in the post-communist period, it was the political right that mobilized anti-minority sentiment. In countries without sizeable ethnic minorities, neither the communist nor post-communist left faced comparable incentives to adopt nationalist appeals. Table 2 summarizes this argument and classifies the four countries accordingly.

Table 2: Critical junctures in CEE party system development

		Market reform from the right	
		No	Yes
Minorities from the political center	No	Market reform by nominally left-wing governments. No significant national minority Cases: Hungary and Poland	Market reform by right-wing governments Significant minority outside the center (Hungarians) Case: Romania
	Yes		Market reform by right-wing governments Significant minority from the center (Russian-speakers) Case: Latvia

Note: The table shows the interaction between political alignment at the time of market reform and the presence of minorities from the political center, as applied to the four countries examined in the paper.

From the perspective of market reform (Binev, 2023), Hungary and Poland experienced a non-aligning juncture, with reform implemented by the socialist government of Horn (1994-98) and the trade union-backed presidency of Wałęsa (1990-93), respectively. In contrast, Romania underwent an aligning juncture, as market reform was carried out by the right-wing administration of President Constantinescu between 1996 and 2000. Latvia represents an ambiguous case: market reform was implemented by the right-wing administration of Birkavs-Gailis (1993-94), but this was primarily opposed by the weakened Harmony party, a social-democratic formation representing the Russian-speaking minority. Unlike Latvia, where the minority originated from the communist center and contributed to a culturally progressive left, Romania’s Hungarian minority was not associated with former state power. Their presence enabled the Ceaușescu regime and,

subsequently, the left-wing administration of President Iliescu to mobilize nationalist sentiment.

Based on the interaction between alignment at the time of market reform and minority status, I expect cultural issues to dominate in countries where economic conflicts were quickly pacified by nominally left-wing parties converging with the right on economic policy (Coman, 2017). This applies to Hungary and Poland. In contrast, an aligning structure combined with a nationalist left leads to a diminished role for cultural, and a heightened role for economic, conflicts, as seen in Romania. Where an aligning structure coexists with a culturally progressive left, both types of conflicts are likely to be equally salient, which characterizes the Latvian trajectory. Accordingly, I hypothesize:

*H<sub>2A</sub>: In Hungary and Poland, cultural issues are more salient and more politicized than economic issues. In Romania, economic issues are more salient and more politicized than cultural issues. Latvia represents an intermediate case.*

While critical junctures in the early 1990s help explain deep-seated cross-sectional differences between CEE party systems, more recent developments, such as democratic backsliding in Hungary and Poland, suggest that the relative importance of different conflict dimensions may evolve over time. Cleavage theory posits that once societal conflicts become politicized and institutionalized, they tend to exhibit path dependence and long-term persistence (Bartolini and Mair, 1990; Bornschieer, 2010). However, new or previously latent cleavages can intensify during periods of institutional disruption or political realignment, especially when political actors mobilize emerging divides for strategic purposes (Gessler and Wunsch, 2025; Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Hutter and Kriesi, 2019; Rovny, 2023). Cultural conflicts linked to exclusionary identity politics and national sovereignty are likely susceptible to such politicization, since they often provide the ideological justification for illiberalism and democratic backsliding (Enyedi, 2024; Laruelle, 2022). In this context, I expect cultural issues to become increasingly salient and politicized over time, especially in countries where democratic institutions have eroded. By contrast, in countries with more resilient democratic frameworks or weaker cultural cleavages, these trends may be absent or more muted. In more formal terms:

*H<sub>2B</sub>: Salience and politicization of economic issues will remain stable over time, while cultural issues will become more salient and more politicized in countries experiencing democrating backsliding.*

***Sources of change: established and new parties***

The preceding discussion focused on structural explanations of party competition, setting aside the agency of specific parties. Yet parties play an active role in shaping the configuration and salience of programmatic divides, particularly in less institutionalized environments like CEE. Structural factors such as historical legacies and institutional design constrain political parties, but they also create opportunities to mobilize voters. In general models of cleavage formation, societal change is typically reflected through the emergence of new parties, rather than through established parties shifting their programmatic positions (Hooghe and Marks, 2018). For the purposes of this analysis, I define established parties as those that have been in the national parliament for at least two consecutive terms *or* have previously participated in a government coalition.<sup>3</sup> Even in younger democracies like those in Latin America, established parties face significant reputational costs if they attempt to reposition themselves (Lupu, 2016; Roberts, 2014). Nonetheless, there is some evidence that, particularly in the more fluid contexts of CEE, party agency plays an important role in cleavage mobilization, even among established parties, due to their relatively unconstrained capacity to reposition themselves along key divides (Enyedi, 2005; Sikk and Köker, 2023, pp. 201-202). This does not imply, however, that parties are entirely free to adopt any position in the party system at will. Rather, given the preferences of their existing supporters (Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2012), programmatic signaling tends to reinforce their distinctive political brand in relation to competitors. As party competition becomes more routinized, these issue profiles are likely to stabilize and persist, rather than converge or shift dramatically.

*H<sub>3A</sub>: Over time, established parties maintain stable and distinct issue profiles,*

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<sup>3</sup>This definition builds on De Vries and Hobolt (2020), who define mainstream parties as those that have previously been in government. I extend this definition to also include parties that have been in parliament for at least two consecutive terms, as they are often perceived as part of the political establishment in Eastern European contexts where new party emergence is frequent.

*reflecting routinized programmatic competition.*

As in the Western European literature, scholars studying CEE also emphasize new parties as the primary source of party system renewal (Engler, 2023; Haughton and Deegan-Krause, 2020; Tavits, 2008). While there are various definitions of new parties (e.g., Litton, 2015; Sikk, 2005), I define them as those that enter national parliament for the first time. New parties are not constrained by reputational costs and are therefore freer to politicize new issues. Accordingly, Tavits (2008) argues that new parties emerge primarily on programmatic grounds. Her analysis of voter flows, based on expert and population surveys, shows that new parties attract votes from their spatial neighbors rather than succeeding independently of their policy positions. Rovny and Edwards (2012) similarly argue that programmatic appeals are decisive for new party entry. They show that, unlike established parties, new parties in CEE often compete on issues that fall outside the central axis of competition and must ‘struggle over dimensionality’ in order to gain electoral traction.

In contrast, a substantial body of literature argues that new parties often emerge on non-policy grounds. Engler (2023) shows that some of the most successful new parties, characterized as centrist anti-establishment forces, primarily mobilize around an anti-corruption appeal. Sikk (2005) similarly argues that newness alone can constitute a compelling electoral appeal for incoming parties. In this view, new parties are frequently interpreted as protest formations against established politics (Pop-Eleches, 2010), rather than as actors that expand representation by programmatically differentiating themselves from existing organizations. However, both Engler (2023) and Haughton and Deegan-Krause (2020) emphasize that only those new parties that manage to programmatically distinguish themselves, at least along some of the central dimensions, are likely to endure. From a cleavage theory perspective, I therefore formulate the expectation that:

*H<sub>3B</sub>: New parties emphasize and politicize issues that are underemphasized by established parties.*

## Data and methods

Programmatic structuration in CEE is most commonly studied using expert surveys (Engler, 2023; Marks et al., 2006; Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2009; Rovny and Polk, 2017) or party manifestos (Sikk and Köker, 2023). However, both sources of information are largely indirect from the perspective of voters. To more closely approximate the interaction between supply- and demand-side dynamics, the empirical analysis relies on the PolDem-National Election Campaign Dataset (Kriesi et al., 2020), which is based on media coverage of electoral campaigns. Previous research has shown that party positions estimated from this dataset strongly correlate with those derived from expert surveys and party manifestos (Gessler and Hutter, 2025; Helbling and Tresch, 2011). In contrast, there is more divergence in terms of issue salience. As Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2009) argue, salience is more context-dependent and, in the case of this dataset, is also influenced by the media agenda during the campaign period (Gessler and Hutter, 2025). This variation in salience is an advantage, as it allows the data to closely reflect the central debates unfolding in specific geographic and temporal contexts. At the same time, because it does not abstract away the ‘noise’ inherent in party position-taking, the dataset provides a conservative test of my hypotheses on programmatic structuration.

The analysis draws on media coverage of a total of 29 election campaigns across the four countries under study: 7 from Hungary (1994-2022), 8 from Latvia (1993-2022), 7 from Poland (1997-2023), and 7 from Romania (1996-2020). These countries were selected to capture the heterogeneity among EU member states from CEE. As previously discussed, they represent different varieties of communist legacies, institutional frameworks, trajectories of market reform, democratic backsliding, and state capacities (for further reflections on case selection, see Hutter and Kriesi, 2019, pp. 34-38). While the dataset does not include two frequently studied cases, Czechia and Slovakia, it does incorporate two less commonly examined cases, Latvia and Romania. Compared to previous studies using this dataset (e.g., Borbáth, 2021; Hutter and Kriesi, 2019; Kriesi et al., 2008), the current analysis expands coverage by including elections from the 1990s as well as those held after 2017 in each of the four countries (see Appendix C, Table 1).



The data, presented in detail in Appendix C, capture the dynamics of parliamentary election campaigns based on coverage from two national daily newspapers in each country (Hutter and Kriesi, 2019; Kriesi et al., 2008). The dataset is constructed using the core sentence coding method, a relational form of content analysis in which each grammatical sentence is reduced to its ‘core sentence’, capturing a subject’s relation to an object. Direction is coded on a scale from -1 (complete opposition) to 1 (full support). The dataset records both actor-actor and actor-issue relationships.

Issues are coded in fine detail but are aggregated into 16 categories spanning economic (economic liberalism, economic reform, welfare, education, infrastructure), cultural (cultural liberalism, environment, anti-immigration, nationalism, Europe, COVID-19, defense, security, regionalism), and political (anti-corruption, democracy) conflicts (see Appendix C, Table 3; see also Hutter and Kriesi, 2019).<sup>4</sup> Individual politicians are grouped by party affiliation, and the dataset includes all parties mentioned in newspaper coverage during the campaign. A key advantage of this dataset is that it provides information on both salience and position-taking, while also enabling flexible aggregation across different analytical levels.

The dataset is analyzed at two levels of aggregation: the party-system level and the party level. At the party-system level, the unit of analysis is the individual core sentence, with an average of 2,031 sentences per campaign. At the party level, the unit of analysis is the party-issue-election combination. The dataset is “filled” with all observed party-issue combinations within each campaign. Consequently, if a party was not covered in relation to a specific issue or did not take a position on that issue, it is still included in the dataset, coded with zero salience and a neutral (ambiguous) position for that issue. The indicators for new parties, established parties, and government participation are constructed based on the ParlGov dataset (Döring et al., 2023). The list of established and new parties are provided in Appendix B.

At the party-system level, I define three dependent variables: the level of programmatic

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<sup>4</sup>The cultural dimension includes a heterogeneous set of issues that reflect context-specific dynamics. In the CEE context, the distinction between “old” and “new” cultural issues is less relevant, as both types of conflicts emerged around the same time.

competition, issue salience, and issue politicization. At the party level, I introduce two additional dependent variables: issue salience and issue entrepreneurship. Three of these five measures – party level and system-level issue salience, as well as politicization – have been previously introduced in the literature (e.g., Hutter and Kriesi, 2019). At the party-system level, issue salience is measured as the share of total campaign coverage devoted to a given issue. At the party level, it refers to the share of issue-related coverage within the total media coverage of the respective party. Politicization is operationalized as the product of salience and polarization (Hutter and Kriesi, 2019). In contrast, the measures of programmatic competition and issue entrepreneurship have not yet been applied in prior studies using the PolDem dataset (Hutter and Kriesi, 2019; Kriesi et al., 2008).

The extent of programmatic coverage refers to the share of campaign coverage devoted to issues on which parties adopt a clear directional stance. This measure captures the proportion of the campaign that involves positional, rather than valence-based, contestation. In line with Haughton and Deegan-Krause (2020, p. 130), it excludes non-policy-related core sentences as well as economic and political valence statements. Specifically, I exclude from the calculation: non-policy-related sentences; the two political categories (democracy and anti-corruption); the economic valence category on reform (which includes general statements about economic improvement or support for vulnerable groups); and any sentences lacking a clear issue reference (almost all of which are actor-actor relationships). Programmatic coverage is thus based on the share of positional statements related to economic or cultural issues within a given campaign.

Issue entrepreneurship is operationalized using the formula proposed by Hobolt and De Vries (2015), which captures the extent to which parties actively seek to differentiate themselves from their competitors on particular issues. It is calculated as the product of issue salience at the party level and the absolute value of the party’s deviation from the party-system average position on that issue. This approach emphasizes positional distinctiveness regardless of direction (i.e., support or opposition), enabling a symmetrical assessment of differentiation. In essence, a party engages in issue entrepreneurship when it both emphasizes an issue and adopts a position that sets it apart from its competitors,

thereby signaling to voters a unique programmatic profile. Table 3 presents the formulas for the five dependent variables, each calculated in the context of a single campaign (to avoid campaign indexing).

Table 3: Operationalization of key dependent variables

Level	Variable	Formula and Description
Party-level	Issue Salience	$\text{Salience}_{i,k} = \frac{\omega_{i,k}}{\sum_i \omega_{i,k}}$ Number of core sentences on issue $i$ associated with party $k$ , divided by the number of actor-issue core sentences by party $k$ .
Party-level	Issue Entrepreneurship	$\text{Entrep}_{i,k} = \left( \frac{\omega_{i,k}}{\sum_i \omega_{i,k}} \right) \cdot  x_{i,k} - \bar{x}_i $ Product of issue salience for party $k$ on issue $i$ and the absolute deviation of its position $x_{i,k}$ from the party-system average position $\bar{x}_i$ on that issue.
System-level	Programmatic Coverage	$\text{Prog. Coverage} = \frac{\sum_{i(\text{positional})} \omega_i}{\omega_{(\text{total})}}$ Number of core sentences on positional issues, divided by the total number of core sentences in the campaign.
System-level	Issue Salience	$\text{Salience}_i = \frac{\omega_i}{\omega_{(\text{total})}}$ Number of core sentences on issue $i$ , divided by the total number of core sentences.
System-level	Politicization	$\text{Politicization}_i = \text{Salience}_i \cdot \text{Polarization}_i$ Polarization is calculated as: $\text{Polarization}_i = \sum_{k=1}^K \omega_k (x_{i,k} - \bar{x}_i)^2$ , where $\bar{x}_i = \sum_{k=1}^K \omega_k x_{i,k}$ . Captures the product of system-level issue salience and the weighted variance of party positions on issue $i$ .

Note:  $\omega_{i,k}$  refers to the number of core sentences on issue  $i$  for party  $k$ ;  $\omega_k$  is the total number of core sentences for party  $k$ ;  $x_{i,k}$  is party  $k$ 's position on issue  $i$ ;  $\bar{x}_i$  is the weighted average position on issue  $i$  across all parties.

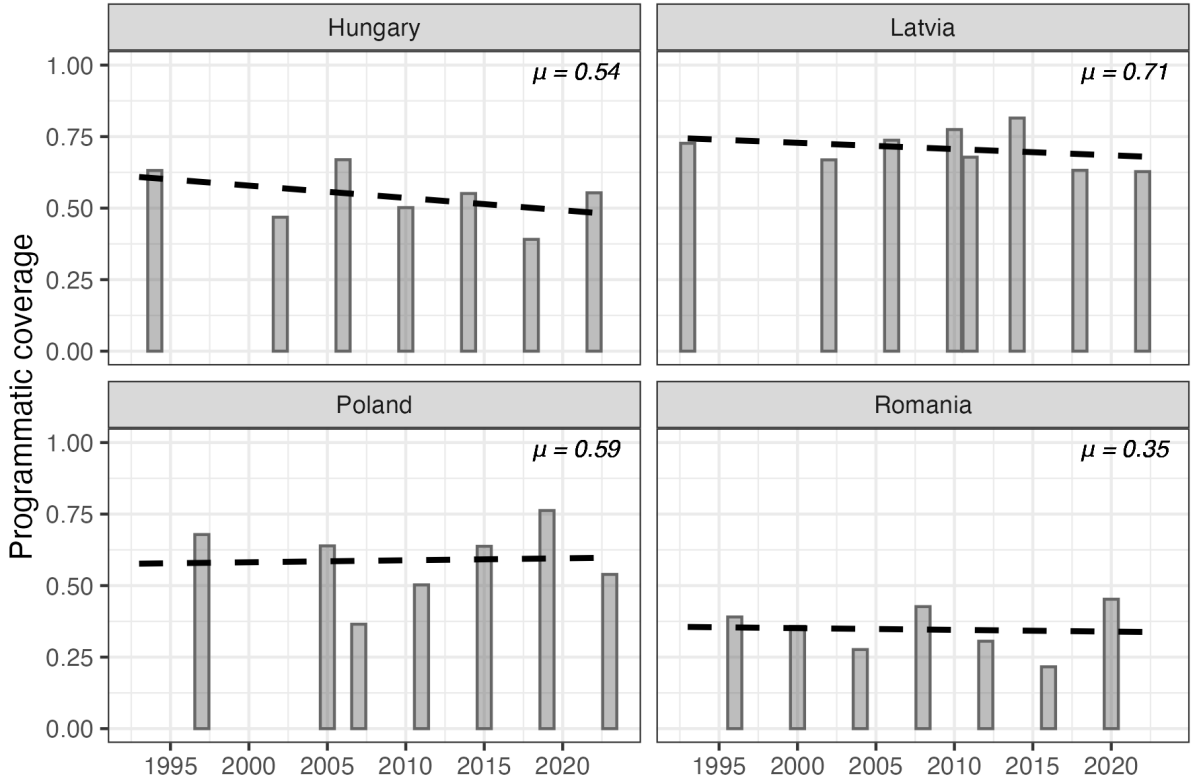
## Empirical results

### *Party-system-level*

I start the presentation of the results with the extent of programmatic coverage. Figure 2 shows the indicator of programmatic competition over time in the four countries. The figure includes the value of programmatic competition averaged across the elections present

in the data. It also includes a linear trend line estimated with an OLS regression.

Figure 2: Programmatic party competition over time



Note: The figure shows the share of core sentences with a reference to positional issues. The value in the upper right corner is averaged across the elections present in the data. The trend line is estimated with an OLS regression.

In  $H_{1A}$ , I expected countries with less favorable legacies, but without significant democratic backsliding (e.g., Latvia) to exhibit higher levels of programmatic competition than those with favorable legacies, but democratic erosion (e.g., Hungary, Poland), or structurally weaker systems (e.g., Romania). The results support this expectation. Latvia demonstrates a relatively high level of programmatic competition, exceeding the expectations formulated by Kitschelt (1995) and partly challenging previous accounts that emphasize anti-corruption and anti-establishment appeals. Latvian parties strongly politicize both cultural and economic issues (see 3), indicating robust programmatic differentiation.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Poland and Hungary show comparatively high levels of programmatic competition, albeit clustering below Latvia. Their levels remain substantial, despite signs of

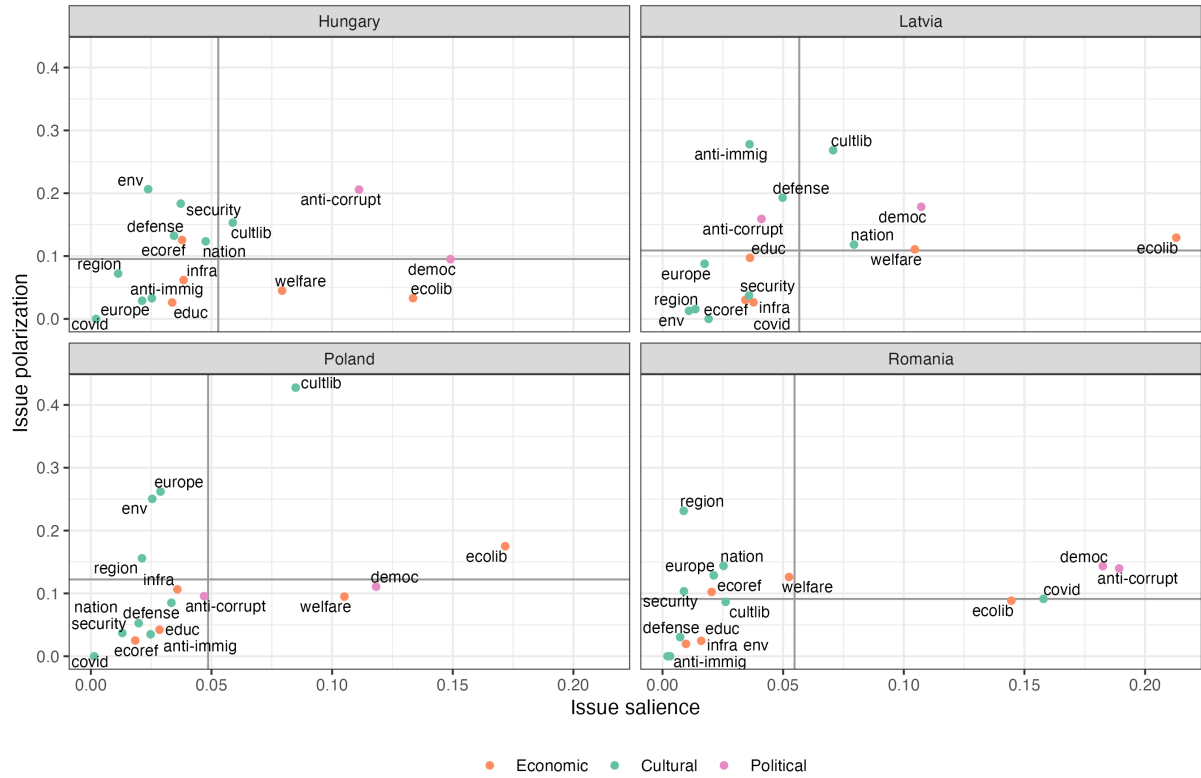
<sup>5</sup>I do not focus on programmatic competition on the party-level, since it has been explored by the previous literature (most recently by Engler, 2023).

democratic erosion in the 2010s, and are only slightly below those observed in some of the six Northwestern European countries originally studied by Kriesi et al. (2008) (see Appendix A, Figure 2). Romania, in contrast, is a clear laggard, with only a third of campaign coverage engaging with economic or cultural positional issues. These findings support  $H_{1A}$ , highlighting how democratic backsliding and structural weaknesses constrain programmatic competition.

In  $H_{1B}$ , I hypothesized that the level of programmatic party competition would remain relatively stable over time, with no consistent trend across the four countries. The results largely support this expectation. Across most election cycles, programmatic competition shows modest fluctuations and no sustained upward or downward trajectory. A potential exception is Hungary, where a decline begins after 2006. This drop corresponds to an increased emphasis on valence issue by opposition parties focusing on corruption and the erosion of democratic norms. However, a similar pattern is not observed in Poland after 2015, suggesting that this the result of a context-dependent trajectory of democratic backsliding that does not necessarily travel to other cases (Appendix A, Figure 1 shows the trajectory of backsliding in the four cases).

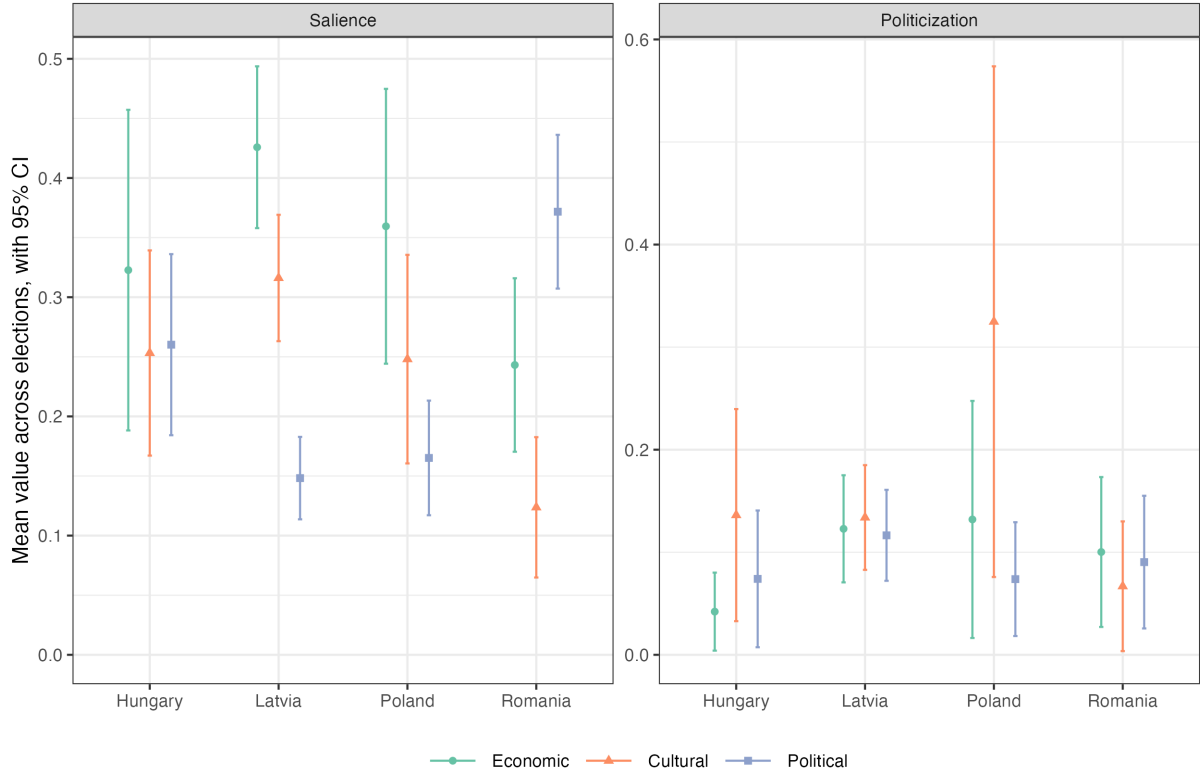
Having established the limits of programmatic party competition, I now examine the party system agenda in the four countries. As described, I classify the 16 issue categories into economic, cultural, and political conflicts. Figure 3 presents the average salience and polarization values across these 16 categories in the four countries, whereas Figure 4 presents the average salience and politicization value across the three broad categories (also see: Wang et al., 2025).

Figure 3: Saliency and polarization across 16 issue categories (1993-2022)



Note: The figure shows the saliency and polarization of issues in Hungary, Latvia, Poland and Romania, averaged over all elections covered by the data. The vertical reference line shows saliency averaged across all issue categories in the respective country. The horizontal reference line shows polarization averaged across all issue categories in the respective country.

Figure 4: Salience and politicization of economic, cultural, and political issues



Note: The figure shows the mean value of salience and politicization calculated by country over the elections in the data. 95% confidence intervals are calculated using the  $t$  distribution.

Based on  $H_{2A}$ , I expected higher levels of salience and politicization for cultural issues compared to economic issues in Hungary and Poland, the reverse pattern in Romania, and an intermediate configuration in Latvia. Although economic issues are more salient than cultural ones in all countries, the expected pattern emerges once party positions are accounted for in the politicization indicator. Cultural issues are most politicized in Poland, but they are also prominent in Hungary (relative to other issues). In both countries the most politicized cultural issues are related to cultural liberalism, coupled in Hungary with nationalism, and in Poland with European integration. The divergence between salience and politicization is due to these conflicts being highly polarized in both countries (to simplify the presentation of the results, the polarization indicator is not shown; see Appendix A, Figure 3). In Latvia and Romania, the level of politicization of cultural issues is comparable to that of economic conflicts. In both countries, cultural issues are less polarized. Notably, in Romania, cultural issues are the least salient (see

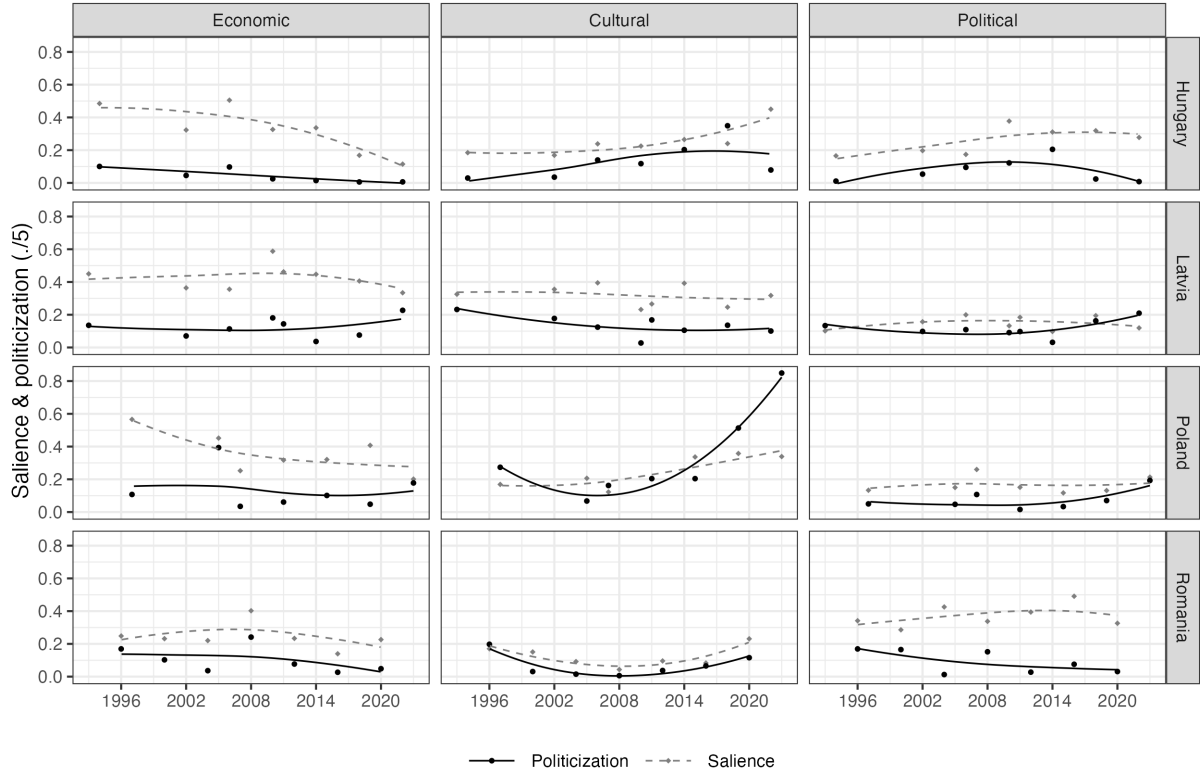
also Borbáth, 2019). I interpret these results as supporting  $H_{2A}$ .

In all four countries, political issues also play a critical role in structuring party competition, albeit in different ways. In Latvia and Poland, political issues are the least salient. While, in Latvia, they are highly polarizing (see Appendix A, Figure 3), and thus highly politicized; in Poland, political issues are neither salient nor characterized by differentiated party positions, and are therefore weakly politicized. In contrast, political issues are highly salient in both Hungary and Romania. However, in neither case are they strongly polarized, and thus they contribute less to overall politicization. These differences are partly explained by how corruption is politicized in each case (see 3). In Hungary and Romania, corruption is both salient and polarizing; in Poland, it is neither; and in Latvia, it is salient but less polarizing. Debates around democracy, by contrast, are highly politicized in all four countries.

To examine  $H_{2B}$ , Figure 5 presents the election-specific salience and politicization of economic, cultural, and political issues in the four countries, with smoothed over time trend lines.



Figure 5: The dynamic of salience and politicization of economic, cultural, and political issues



Note: The figure shows the election-specific values of salience and politicization of economic, cultural, and political issues. The trend lines are smoothed to illustrate long-term change.

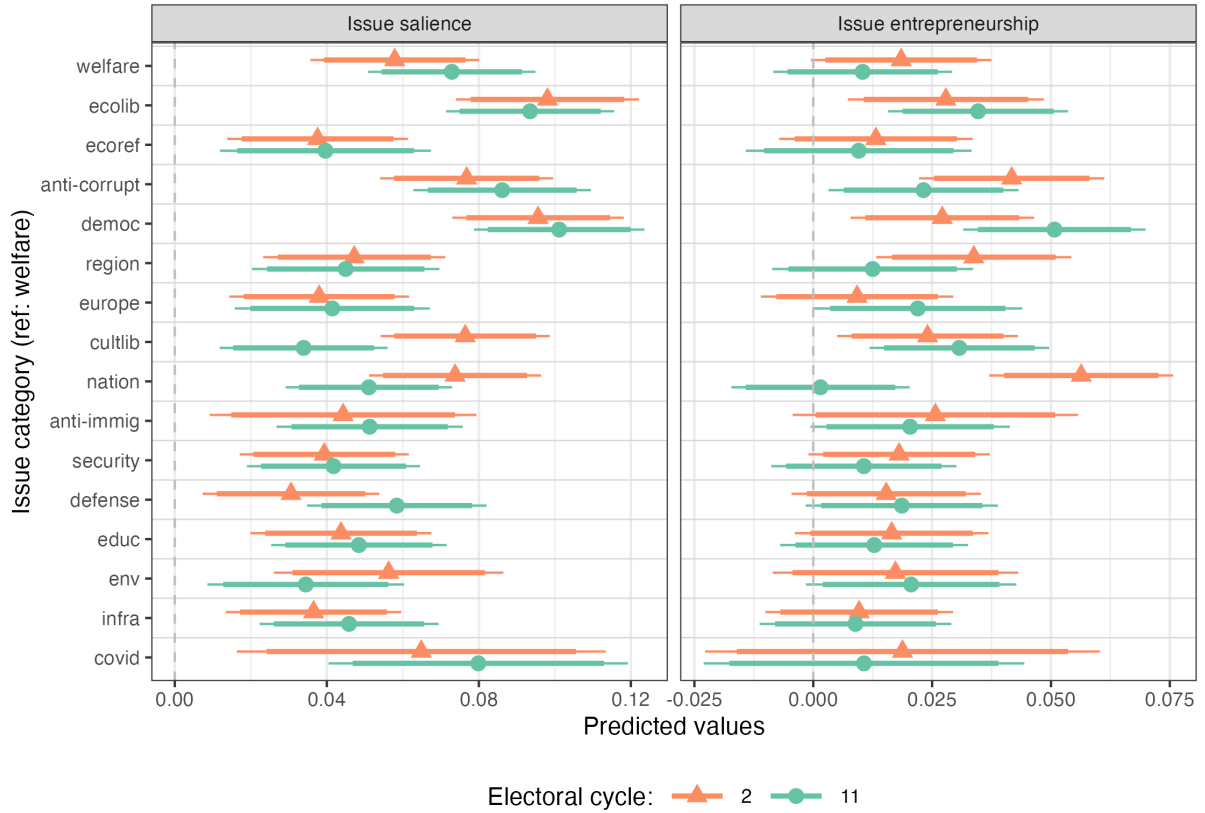
In line with the expectation, the figure shows increasingly salient and politicized cultural issues in three of the four countries. This trend is strongest in Poland, but similar patterns appear in Hungary and, to a lesser extent, in Romania. In both Poland and Hungary, the politicization of cultural issues increases notably after illiberal parties consolidate their dominance in government and democratic backsliding intensifies (2010 in Hungary and 2015 in Poland) – although the 2022 Hungarian election appears to be an exception to this trend. During this election, the left-wing opposition alliance rallied around a center-right candidate, Péter Márki-Zay, who mainly criticized Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz) on political (anti-corruption and democracy) issues. In contrast to these three countries, cultural issues in Latvia remain salient but tend to become less politicized over time. Economic issues remain largely stable in all four countries. Political issues show some increase in politicization in Latvia and Poland. In Hungary and Romania, political conflicts are highly salient but not polarized (see Appendix A, Figure 4), and therefore

exhibit lower levels of politicization. In these two countries the incumbent parties (Fidesz & PSD) use democracy and anti-corruption related arguments against their opposition, which results in a lower level of polarization around political issues. Overall, these results are consistent with the expectations formulated in H<sub>2B</sub>.

### *Party-level*

Next, I turn to the party-level analysis. To account for the possibility that change is limited to issues that are not integrated into the central ‘axis of competition’ in a multi-dimensional space (Rovny and Edwards, 2012), I rely on the original 16 issue categories. I model issue salience and entrepreneurship using linear regression models that include controls for government participation, the number of core sentences associated with the party, the party-issue pair, and the issue. The model also includes country fixed effects. Given that H<sub>3A</sub> refers to established parties, only the parties that have been in the national parliament for at least two consecutive terms *or* have previously participated in a government coalition are included. To model over-time trends, I create a within-country ranking variable that numbers the electoral cycles from the first election after 1990 to the most recent one. The regression includes a two-way interaction term between this ranking variable and issue category. To simplify the presentation of the results, Figure 6 only shows the marginal effects for the interaction term (see Appendix A, Table 1 for the corresponding regression table).

Figure 6: Issue salience and entrepreneurship by established parties over time



Note: The figure shows the marginal effect of the interaction between issue category and election rank, with issue salience and entrepreneurship as dependent variables. The thicker error bars show 90% and the thinner error bars show 95% confidence intervals. The models are estimated with country-fixed effects. See Appendix A, Table 1 for the corresponding regression table.

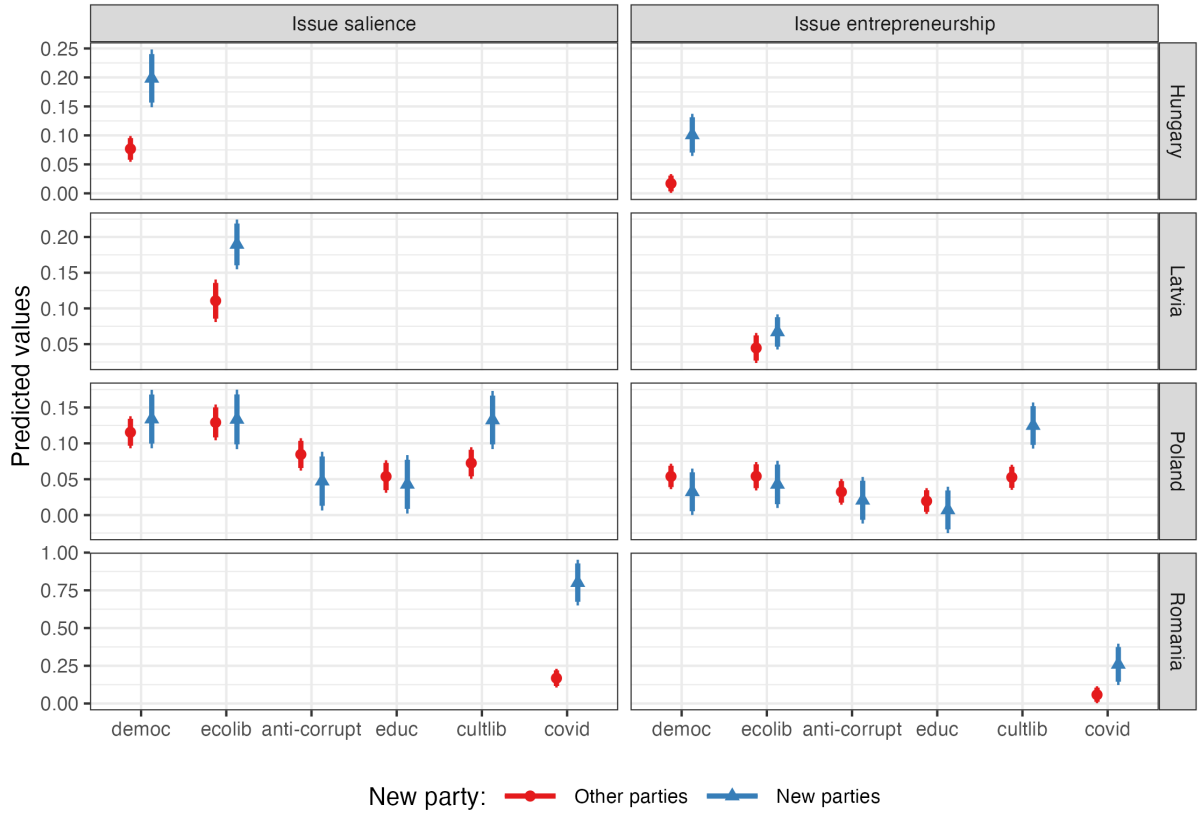
The results broadly support  $H_{3A}$ , in terms of stability and distinctiveness. First, the predicted stability of established parties' issue profiles is confirmed by the overall pattern of limited and issue-specific change. Across most issue areas, both salience and issue entrepreneurship remain stable over time, indicating that established parties consistently prioritize a core set of programmatic issues. This reflects routinized competition, where programmatic commitments become institutionalized.

Second, the results also support the distinctiveness component of  $H_{3A}$ : established parties remain differentiated from one another in their issue salience. This is evidenced by the differentiated trends observed across issue categories. While there is some over-time change – such as increased salience on defense, and decreasing attention to cultural liberalism, nationalism, and environmental issues – these shifts are issue-specific rather than uniform or systemic. Similarly, in terms of issue entrepreneurship, established parties

increase their distinctiveness on democracy and European integration, while deprioritizing nationalism and regionalism. These selective changes likely reflect strategic competition rather than wholesale repositioning.

Next, I turn to the analysis of differentiation by new parties. Since the category of new parties is likely heterogeneous, with profiles that vary substantially across countries, I estimate separate models for each of the four countries. As before, I model party-level issue salience and entrepreneurship using the same control variables and election-fixed effects. The models include a two-way interaction term between newness and the 16 issue categories. To simplify the presentation of the results, Figure 7 includes only those issues for which differences in salience *or* entrepreneurship between new and established parties are statistically significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level (see Appendix A, Tables 2-3 for the corresponding regression tables).

Figure 7: Issue salience and entrepreneurship by new parties



Note: The figure shows the marginal effect of the interaction between issue category and new party status, with issue salience and entrepreneurship as dependent variables. The models are estimated separately for each of the four countries, with election-fixed effects. Only differences that are statistically significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level are shown. See Appendix A, Tables 2-3 for the corresponding regression tables.

The results reveal clear differences between new and established parties in terms of programmatic engagement, broadly supporting  $H_{3B}$ . That is, new parties tend to emphasize and politicize issues that are less prominently addressed by established actors, though the patterns vary by country. In Hungary, new parties are notably differentiated by their greater salience and entrepreneurship on democracy-related issues. In Latvia, they are characterized by a higher level of salience and entrepreneurship on economic liberalism. In Poland, new parties are most clearly distinguished in terms of issue entrepreneurship. Although the effect sizes are modest, new parties appear less invested in entrepreneurship on economic liberalism, anti-corruption, and education, likely due to the strong politicization of these issues by established actors (see Engler, 2023, on the role of anti-corruption in the appeal of Law and Justice (PiS)).<sup>6</sup> At the same time, Polish new parties show a

<sup>6</sup>Since the 2001 parliamentary election is not covered by the data, PiS is not considered a new party

substantively and statistically significant increase in both salience and entrepreneurship on cultural liberalism, indicating a strategic move into an under-emphasized issue space. In Romania, differentiation is limited to the COVID-19 issue. This is driven by the emergence of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), a new radical-right party that entered parliament in 2020 with a campaign opposing COVID-19-related restrictions.

## Conclusions

Against the background of persistently high electoral volatility in Eastern Europe, this paper has examined the extent to which CEE party systems are characterized by programmatic party competition, with well-differentiated appeals by both established and new parties. Although the analysis focuses on only four countries, the cases were selected to capture meaningful variation in key contextual factors, including historical legacies, institutional frameworks, trajectories of market reform, and experiences of democratic backsliding. This variation reinforces the argument that the conceptual framework and empirical findings help explain broader regional patterns beyond the four cases studied. The empirical results support at least three main conclusions.

First, programmatic competition has reached relatively high levels across the region – only slightly lower than those observed in Northwestern Europe. Over time, it appears to have reached a state of equilibrium: there is no consistent trend toward increasing or decreasing programmatic competition. Regarding country differences, democratic backsliding has not systematically undermined programmatic competition in Hungary or Poland. Latvia emerges as the most programmatic system, clearly exceeding legacy-based expectations, while Romania stands out as a laggard, with a notably low level of programmatic structuration.

Second, consistent with prior literature, both economic and cultural issues shape party competition in the region, though with significant cross-national variation. These differences can be traced back to a critical juncture in the 1990s, when left parties crystallized their positions on market reform and minority rights. As a result, national party systems

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in any of the elections; see Appendix B for the full classification.

became structured predominantly by cultural issues (Hungary and Poland), economic issues (Romania), or a combination of both (Latvia). The findings also suggest that cultural issues have grown in importance, particularly in the two backsliding countries, Hungary and Poland. This trend may reflect the effects of a new critical juncture, reinforced by processes of autocratization. The findings further indicate that the COVID-19 crisis may have represented a similar turning point in Romanian politics by facilitating the politicization of cultural conflict. In a dynamic typical of new cleavage formation, the crisis paved the way for the parliamentary breakthrough of AUR, a genuinely new party, after nearly two decades without radical right representation.

Third, the results underscore the dual role of established and new parties in sustaining and expanding programmatic competition. Among established parties, the findings point to routinized competition with relatively stable and differentiated appeals that evolve only in limited, context-driven ways. In contrast, new parties expand the programmatic spectrum by emphasizing underemphasized issues. These include political issues in Hungary, cultural issues in Poland and Romania, and economic issues in Latvia. Furthermore, the Polish case also illustrates that new parties may, under certain conditions, devote less attention to non-programmatic issues like anti-corruption than their established counterparts. Overall, the findings underscore the relevance of cleavage theory for conceptualizing and empirically capturing the dynamics of party competition in CEE.

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