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A Typology of Postcommunist Successor Parties in Central and Eastern Europe and an Explanatory Framework for Their (Non-)Success

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Abstract

This article revisits the phenomenon of postcommunist successor parties – defined as the formal successor organizations of state-socialist ruling parties – in Central and Eastern Europe three decades after the transformative events of 1989–91 and two decades after the most recent period of sustained academic interest in the topic. The article begins with a critical reexamination of the late 1990s and early 2000s comparative politics literature on postcommunist successor parties, noting in particular its reliance on path dependency as well as subsequent empirical developments that cannot be explained by established approaches. From here, this article argues that major changes in the electoral fortunes of numerous successor parties since the mid-2000s require instead a relational perspective on party competition and interactions with competitor parties in the respective party systems, allowing for the identification of realigning elections in which successor parties are programmatically outflanked or crowded out on one or more issue dimensions by competitors or vice versa. The article applies this perspective to reexamine successor parties in six countries that exhibit a pronounced explanatory deficit vis-à-vis the previous literature: Czech Republic, (the former East) Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. In doing so, it draws

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on expert survey (CHES) data and postelection studies on voter flows in addition to qualitative case analyses in order to demonstrate these interactions at work in critical phases of successor-party decline or growth.

Keywords

Central and Eastern Europe – elections – party systems – political parties – postcommunism

Three decades after the transformational events in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) of 1989–91, the postcommunist left – or what is left of it – faced a somewhat awkward anniversary, albeit for reasons that one would not have expected at the turn of the millennium. Contrary to the expectations formulated in the comparative scholarship around the year 2000, it is arguably those parties embracing the neoliberal economic orthodoxy early on that suffered the steepest electoral declines starting in the mid-2000s, especially the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) and the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) in Poland. Meanwhile, it was the Czech Communists (KSČM) and the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) in Germany (reestablished as Die Linke following a 2007 merger), often classified as "non-reformed" successor parties with little chances of longer-term survival in previous comparative studies, that exhibited considerable electoral stability and partly even exceeded the vote shares of their Hungarian and Polish counterparts before cratering in the 2021 elections. Turning further east, the Social Democratic Party (PSD) in Romania points to a notable case of a postcommunist successor party remaining the dominant center-left force in the party system, albeit with considerable fluctuations in support that do not square with previous studies' assumptions of path-dependent stability. The uneven temporality of these developments points to a conspicuous explanatory deficit in light of an earlier comparative literature in which path-dependent explanations of electoral success predicted, respectively, either a "clientelist" (Romania) or programmatic-based success (Hungary, Poland) or a progressive dying out (Czech Republic, Germany) of successor parties based on longer-term historical factors.

This article revisits the question of the varying success levels of postcommunist successor parties from a comparative perspective, taking as its starting a point a body of literature that addressed this question in the late 1990s and early 2000s. We first undertake an immanent critique of this literature by maintaining the latter's sensitivity to the programmatic dimension in explaining

successor-party success, while identifying a dynamic and holistic view of party competition as an overlooked dimension that accounts for changes in successor parties' (in)ability to maintain, for instance, a left-of-center positioning on the socioeconomic issue dimension relative to other parties. We thus propose a relational approach that takes into account competitive interactions in the party system (such as outflanking or crowding-out) and identify realigning elections in which the successor parties are outflanked or crowded out by competitors or vice versa. We then present a detailed account of six cases – the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia – that exhibit a clear explanatory deficit *vis-à-vis* the previous literature. Methodologically, we pursue a mixed-methods approach that triangulates between three types of empirical evidence – qualitative case analysis, Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) data, and postelection surveys – and develop, on this basis, a classification of the six successor parties into four types: *Third Way social-liberal* (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia), *democratic socialist* (Germany), *semi-authoritarian communist* (Czech Republic), and *conservative social-democratic* (Romania). In the following, we first introduce our conceptualization of successor parties and situate our perspective in relation to the literature of interest for our study. After a discussion of our methodology and data, we present an in-depth analysis of the successor parties and their phases of different electoral success levels in the six country cases we consider to be inadequately explained by this literature. Based on this analysis, we propose a typology of successor parties in terms of both programmatic type and electoral success. Finally, we provide a summary and reflect on overall patterns as well as the changing fortunes of these parties.

Conceptualizing Postcommunist Successor Parties in Comparative Perspective

Path-Dependent Organizational and Programmatic Determinants of Successor-Party Success: A Critical Review

Postcommunist successor parties can be defined – following the likes of Bozóki and Ishiyama (2002), Grzymała-Busse (2002), but also Loxton (2018) on the broader concept of authoritarian successor parties – as the formal successor organizations of the main ruling parties (as opposed to minor satellite parties) of one-party state-socialist regimes. This definition singles out the organizational rather than the programmatic dimension of successorship, encompassing those parties that emerged from processes of state-socialist ruling parties rebranding and reestablishing themselves as new organizations, typically in

the form of a formal declaration at a party congress, in the context of regime change in these countries. While parties that fall under this definition exhibit a wide range of ideological and programmatic profiles as well as stances on their ruling-party pasts, the definitional emphasis on organizational successorship excludes parties that positioned themselves as ideological heirs to state-socialist ruling parties without actually emerging from the latter's structures (such as the post-1993 Communist Party of the Russian Federation or the post-1994 Communist Party of Ukraine). This organization-centric definition has a certain analytical value in opening comparative avenues for exploring the implications of successor parties' inheritance of the organizational assets – or "usable pasts," following Grzymała-Busse (2002) – and the symbolic burdens (and/or assets) of association with pre-1989 ruling-party organizations. The question thus becomes to what extent and in what ways these parties are able to exploit their first-mover advantage as the most organized parties at the outset of postcommunist transition in countries where multiparty systems were only beginning to develop.

This line of inquiry came to the fore in path-dependent approaches to conceptualizing postcommunist successor parties and explaining their different degrees of electoral success in comparative perspective, which became the dominant position in the late 1990s and early 2000s literature on the topic (Kim 2017). Here, a consensus emerged that the winning formula for postcommunist successor parties consists in rapid processes of organizational centralization leading to programmatic "social-democratization" (Waller 1995) or "pragmatic reform" (Bozóki and Ishiyama 2002) for which different studies proposed historical preconditions of varying causal depth. Orenstein (1998: 485–486) presented one version of this argument with his thesis that, because the "structure of competition" in 1990s East-Central Europe favors parties supporting market reforms and European integration, the most successful successor party type is the "social-democratic communist successor party" that integrates market-friendly and pro-EU policies into a moderate center-left programmatic profile; they could do this, in turn, thanks to processes of organizational change whereby pragmatic ex-ruling party elites took over these parties and established institutionalized links with newly independent trade unions to form "a cross-class alliance among pro-reform nomenklatura business elites and workers." Grzymała-Busse (2002), in her influential study, presented a deeper causal account by introducing *regime type* into the equation. According to Grzymała-Busse, the Hungarian and Polish successor parties were electorally successful because they had undergone far-reaching programmatic modernization, thanks to early and rapid processes of organizational centralization that enabled reform-oriented party leaderships to push

through their programmatic agendas; this, in turn, was possible (and the party leaderships "reform-oriented") in the first place because the relatively open ruling style of their predecessor parties meant that former ruling-party elites in these countries could draw on "portable skills" from experiences with interest mediation *vis-à-vis* non-regime actor groups and use them to adapt to the new environment. In the former Czechoslovakia, by contrast, the more closed and authoritarian regime with its greater degree of state and party penetration in civil associations meant that the successor parties there lacked these elites and elite resources.

From here, the causal chain could be extended further: Kitschelt (2002) provided an expanded account of "Regime Legacies as Causal Argument," arguing not only that communist regime type ("bureaucratic-authoritarian," "national-accommodative," or "patrimonial") explained the developmental paths and success levels of the successor parties, but also that regime type was itself determined by the timing and duration of industrialization and democratization in these countries. In a comparative framework encompassing twenty-four postcommunist countries, Kitschelt classified East Germany and Czechoslovakia as (the only two) bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes, in which highly organized mass communist parties that had emerged as a result of early industrialization (at least in the Czech lands)[1] and interwar contexts of multiparty competition could resort to high levels of systematic repression against likewise highly organized political opponents; this regime legacy, in turn, gave rise to ideologically unreformed, "ghetto"-like successor parties with tightly-knit membership bases and low shares of the national vote compared to their counterparts in Poland and Hungary. In the latter countries, late industrialization produced relatively weak communist parties that depended on some degree of compromise and openness in their rule – giving rise, in turn, to adaptive, ideologically reformed, and electorally successful successor parties. In patrimonial communist regimes like Romania, on the other hand, the low degree of precommunist industrialization and state-building engendered clientelist-based regime and post-regime practices, giving rise to successor parties with high levels of electoral success sustained by a clientelist, rather than programmatic, logic of limited economic and administrative reforms and a high degree of continuation of state provision of jobs and social services.

Ziblatt and Biziouras (2002), for their part, singled out the *mode of transition from communism* as the key determinant of organizational and ideological

1 Slovakia constitutes something like an intermediate case for Kitschelt due to limited industrialization and development of a bureaucratic state apparatus under the Kingdom of Hungary.

change and, by extension, the electoral success of successor parties. They argued that in East Germany and Czechoslovakia, the "implosion"-like collapse of the one-party regime meant that successor parties could salvage only a small portion of ruling-party assets and thus became financially dependent on membership dues, leading in turn to decentralized organizational structures whereby strong local and regional units could prevent reform-oriented elements of the party leadership from imposing programmatic change on a largely antireform membership base. In Hungary and Poland, by contrast, the relatively negotiated nature of the transition meant that the successor parties could use their role in the designing of the new political system to back the adoption of systems of public funding of political parties that freed them from financial dependence on their own memberships (suggesting, in turn, an early onset of cartelization following Katz and Mair [1995]).

What all these approaches have in common is a path-dependent logic that explains differences in the electoral success of successor parties in terms of programmatic change (as the most proximate link in the causal chain) and organizational change (as a determinant of programmatic change), which may, in turn, be determined by more or less long-term historical factors. What these explanations leave little room for is contingency and, indeed, the agency of the parties themselves; telling in this regard is the title of Ziblatt and Biziouras's study, "Doomed to be Radicals?" What is largely taken for granted is the ability of the successor parties – the "social-democratized" ones in particular – to stably maintain their programmatic identities over time. Our contention is that this earlier comparative literature, as impressive as it is in its systematicity and empirical plausibility up to the early 2000s, lacks a dynamic and holistic understanding of party competition – what Kitschelt (1995) refers to as an "iterative signaling game" in some of his other work on postcommunist party politics – that takes into account the entire relational field of party competition, including encroachments by challenger parties of left *and* right on the relative positionings of successor parties in a multidimensional competitive space. Keying in on the specific shortcomings of this previous literature, therefore, can yield insights for understanding the subsequent development of successor parties in comparative perspective.

Party Competition as Explanatory Dimension

In his comparative analytical framework on the development of postcommunist party systems, Kitschelt conceptualizes party competition in the following terms:

> Party competition is an iterative "signaling game" in which voters and parties learn about each other's "type" through signals (public speech-

> es, parliamentary debates and voting on bills, opinion polls) and develop reputations on which they act. The longer the game is played, the greater is the chance that parties will acquire a programmatic profile. Simultaneously, voters have the opportunity to revise misconceptions they hold about parties.
>
> KITSCHELT 1995: 452

Already from a prognostic and path-dependent approach to postcommunist party politics, Kitschelt's early considerations on the iterative nature of party competition point to a recognition of the relational nature of parties' programmatic identities as the product of competitive interactions in the party system over multiple iterations of party competition. Our contention is that a consistent application of such a relational understanding of party politics is necessary for explaining subsequent developments in the electoral (non-)success of postcommunist successor parties, opening up a diachronic perspective for examining at what point(s) a successor party's relative positioning on, say, the socioeconomic left might be destabilized and even overtaken by competitors from the socioeconomic left or indeed the sociocultural right. As Figure 1 shows, the electoral development of successor parties in six CEE countries suggests numerous trends that are unaccounted for in the previous literature: first, the two poster children of successful social-democratization – the MSZP in Hungary and the SLD in Poland – precipitously declined from peaks of over 40% to around 10% of the vote before subsuming themselves into various electoral alliances since the mid-2010s; the SDĽ in Slovakia went from a 10–15%

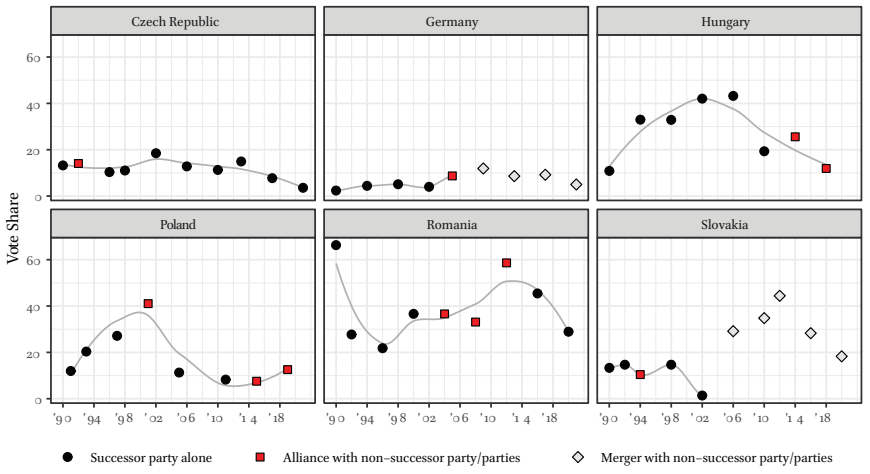

FIGURE 1 The share of votes of post-communist successor parties in six countries
SOURCE: OWN ILLUSTRATION

party to dying out altogether (ultimately merging itself into Smer); second, the German PDS and the Czech KSČM experienced electoral stabilization at around 10% and even semi-growth before a belatedly steep decline toward the late 2010s; finally, the Romanian PSD has experienced wide fluctuations within a high overall level of support instead of maintaining "clientelist"-based stability as expected in the previous literature.

Against this background, we propose two basic types of programmatic-based party interactions to account for punctuated shifts in electoral success: outflanking and crowding-out. *Outflanking* occurs when a party occupying, say, a left-of-center space along a socioeconomic or sociocultural issue dimension is overtaken to its left by a competitor along that dimension. *Crowding-out* occurs when a party markedly reduces the distance between itself and a competitor along one dimension while that competitor is simultaneously outflanked on the same or another dimension by another party, thus being squeezed out from multiple directions. The effects of outflanking and/or crowding-out can be magnified if the issue dimension along which it occurs becomes the main axis of competition at that election, as measured by CHES data. The concepts of outflanking and crowding-out are very much applicable for other party interactions beyond our narrower interest in successor parties, thus allowing for a programmatic-based understanding of successor-party electoral success on the basis of a generalizable perspective on party-system interactions.

Data and Methods

In our analyses, we examine party positions in the party system using three types of data: expert surveys, qualitative case analysis, and postelection surveys. To give a quantitative account of party positions, we draw on the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) (Bakker et al. 2015), which allows us to map party positions in a two-dimensional programmatic space consisting of the socioeconomic (left/right) and sociocultural (GAL/TAN)[2] issue dimensions, yielding an axis of competition as the line of best fit for the data points, weighted by the vote shares of the parties in the preceding national parliamentary elections (Rovny and Polk 2017). This makes it possible to identify instances of a party outflanking or crowding out another along one or both issue dimensions as well as shifts in the axis of competition that indicate that the overall logic of party competition is becoming either more socioeconomic or more sociocultural. As Bakker and Hobolt (2013) show, expert surveys have the advantage

2 "Green-alternative-libertarian" and "traditional-authoritarian-nationalist."

of allowing for a long-term view that goes beyond election-specific dynamics and takes into account parties' policy actions in government in addition to preelection manifesto promises. In order to substantiate the CHES data and place them in proper context, we rely on a qualitative account of party positions over time, drawing on party programs, policy actions, slogans, and various campaign statements in order to present a holistic picture of a party's programmatic profile. Finally, we draw on postelection survey data on voter flows to illustrate the extent to which the successor parties lost voters to the party that programmatically outflanked it or crowded it out or, conversely, gained voters from the party that it outflanked or crowded out. To this end, we draw on election-specific national surveys, most of which come from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). In all the surveys that we included, respondents were asked which party they voted for in the previous national parliamentary election and which party they voted for in the election under consideration. Using responses to these two questions – weighted by respective design weights – we examine voter flows with reference to the successor party in terms of gains and losses (see appendix). In the following, we undertake case analyses of the six successor parties for the entire post-1989 period structured around phases of programmatic orientation and electoral success, while drawing on the CHES and CSES data specifically for realigning elections in which we identify outflanking and/or crowding-out either of or by the successor parties in question.

Empirical Analyses

The Fallen Giants: Hungary (MSZP), Poland (SLD), Slovakia (SDĽ)

The defining feature of the Hungarian, Polish, and Slovak successor parties is that they positioned themselves as early advocates of far-reaching economic liberalization and privatization policies, including shock therapy and austerity measures that these parties presided over to varying extents in government, while also calling for increased social spending and public investments in job creation in order to alleviate social dislocations. The MSZP's 1994 landslide victory came on the back of its promise of "honest and effective privatization" and "the economic and social modernization of the country" (Magyar Szocialista Párt 1994), while the SDĽ emphasized broadening the privatization process to create "as wide a stratum of property owners as possible, including workers" (Spoločná voľba 1994), and the SLD called for complementing the privatization process with targeted public investments within a long-term "state-industrial policy" (Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej 1993). In this manner, these parties

sought to position themselves as the main left-of-center forces along the socioeconomic dimension while also maintaining a secular and antinationalist liberal-democratic sociocultural profile. In the first phase of their development (1989–94), the Hungarian, Polish, and Slovak successor parties rapidly adopted this new programmatic identity and succeeded in entering government within the second postcommunist election cycle – the MSZP and SLD as dominant center-left parties, whereas the SDĽ remained a mid-size force commanding 10–15% of the vote. From a party-competition perspective, the key difference here was that while the MSZP and SLD faced competition almost exclusively to their socioeconomic right, the SDĽ's ability to position itself on the socioeconomic left was limited by what Haughton (2004) tellingly referred to as "the distorting role" of Vladimír Mečiar's HZDS. The HZDS, which emerged from a split in the Public Against Violence (VPN) and took on a nationalist and social-welfarist profile under Mečiar's leadership, anchored the moderately left-of-center socioeconomic and national-conservative sociocultural space, aligning itself with the more radically nationalist Slovak National Party (SNS) in government (1993–94, 1994–98) against an opposition of Christian Democrats, the SDĽ, and minority Hungarian parties. In this context, the SDĽ's appeal on the socioeconomic left was circumscribed from the outset; one indication of this was that unlike its Hungarian and Polish counterparts, the SDĽ lacked institutionalized links with the main trade union confederation, which was initially pro-HZDS before subsequently distancing itself from the Mečiar government.

Once in government, the successor parties in all three countries opted for various combinations of radical market reforms. Gyula Horn's MSZP in Hungary, in coalition with the free-market and socioculturally liberal Free Democrats (SZDSZ), introduced a tough austerity program known as the Bokros package, while the SLD in Poland, in coalition with the agrarian Polish People's Party (PSL), largely continued the privatization-oriented economic policy of predecessor governments while making isolated pro-labor concessions such as free shares for employees of privatized firms (Ost 2005: 80–81). In the wake of the Slovak political crisis of 1993–94 and the fall of the Mečiar government, the SDĽ likewise entered government in coalition with the Democratic Union (DÚ; consisting of anti-Mečiar defectors from the HZDS) and the Christian Democrats (KDH). Here, the SDĽ took charge of the Finance Ministry and oversaw a package of spending cuts in the new government's only budget prior to early elections in 1994. While the SDĽ again finished second in the 1994 elections as part of the Common Choice (SV) alliance with smaller agrarian, Green, and social-democratic parties, even its brief record of neoliberalism in government provoked a split and the formation of the Union of the Workers of Slovakia (ZRS), which outflanked the SDĽ on the socioeconomic left and

joined a coalition government with the HZDS and SNS. This, in turn, reinforced the Mečiar/anti-Mečiar division in the party system pitting social-welfarist nationalists against shifting configurations of the antiauthoritarian economic right, with the SDĽ siding consistently with the latter camp.

In contrast to the SDĽ, both the MSZP in Hungary and the SLD in Poland remained dominant center-left parties even in the wake of their first terms in government (1994–98/1993–97), given the lack of major competitors to their socioeconomic left. Poland was the clearest case in this regard: when the Solidarity Electoral Action (AWS), which won the 1997 parliamentary elections as a broad-tent alliance of the right, attacked the outgoing SLD-led government for supposedly neglecting economic reforms and "not giv[ing] ownership to society through privatization and reprivatization" (Akcja Wyborcza Solidarność 2004: 102), it only reinforced the postcommunist/post-Solidarity divide pitting the postcommunist economic center-left (SLD, PSL) against the social-conservative economic right and thus openly conceded the left-of-center economic space to the "postcommunists." In Hungary, party-system dynamics partly shifted with the transformation of Fidesz from a small liberal youth party into a nationalist and national-conservative force vying to fill the void created by the electoral collapse of the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF). Fidesz, which won the 1998 parliamentary elections, made partial inroads into the MSZP's socioeconomic programmatic space to the extent of denouncing the government's austerity measures and trying to selectively outbid the MSZP with social spending promises, while articulating a sharp "national" vs. "cosmopolitan" opposition on the sociocultural dimension. At this juncture, however, Fidesz's socioeconomic positioning *vis-à-vis* the MSZP fell short of outflanking; its economic program remained a broadly national-liberal one centered on tax cuts, the promotion of "entrepreneurial spirit and entrepreneurial desire," and the continuation of an FDI-oriented development strategy articulated in terms of "the long-term interests of citizens and the nation" (Fidesz 1998).

In their second phase, therefore, the Hungarian, Polish, and Slovak successor parties saw their first government action during the second postcommunist election cycle (for six months in 1994 in Slovakia and 1993–1997/1994–98 in Poland and Hungary), ceded government to their right-wing/nationalist opponents at the next elections, and then ultimately made their comeback at the following elections (2002 in Hungary, 2001 in Poland, 1998 in Slovakia). In Slovakia, the SDĽ went up to 14% of the vote at the 1998 elections with the electoral collapse of the ZRS following the latter's term in government; at the same time, the balance of forces within the anti-Mečiar camp shifted, with Mikuláš Dzurinda's Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK) making a breakthrough as the main opposition to Mečiar. When the SDĽ joined what was in effect another

anti-Mečiar coalition government in 1998, it joined forces with parties that were all on the economic right and center, with variations on the sociocultural dimension. In Hungary and Poland, both the MSZP and SLD won over 40% of the vote and formed another coalition with the SZDSZ and PSL after the 2002 and 2001 parliamentary elections, respectively. In all three countries, the successor parties, coming off four years of opposition, sought to reinforce their socioeconomically left-of-center programmatic identity at these elections. Both the SDĽ and SLD emphasized public investment in job creation to reduce unemployment and restore "social security," while the MSZP presented its most left-wing program yet under the slogan "Welfare System Change," promising a flood of new social spending that "stops the splitting into two of the society, reinforces national cohesion, and secures our catching up to the ranks of the developed nations" (Magyar Szocialista Párt 2002).

In their second terms in government, however, the successor parties suffered from severe erosions of their left-of-center programmatic identity and outflanking by competitor parties to their socioeconomic left, undergoing punctuated electoral decline – with the Hungarian exception here being that the MSZP was first reelected in 2006, thanks in large part to the energetic implementation of its welfare agenda in its second term (2002–06), and entered precipitous decline in its third term (2006–10). This is the third, and critical, phase in the development of these three successor parties, culminating in the realigning elections of 2002 in Slovakia, 2005 in Poland, and 2010 in Hungary. We now devote a separate sub-section with a more in-depth analysis for each case.

Slovakia

The first Dzurinda government's (1998–2002) agenda was centered on a far-reaching economic liberalization program intended to put Slovakia's EU accession bid back on track, after a series of highly public rebukes of the last Mečiar government by European institutions had placed Slovakia's path to the EU in doubt. The SDĽ again took responsibility for the Finance Ministry and the fiscal austerity measures that came with it; as minister, Brigitta Schmögnerová introduced a highly unpopular package of utility price increases and spending cuts, garnering praise from the IMF and credit rating agencies but public criticism from party colleagues as the SDĽ's poll ratings plummeted. Following a leadership change in the party in 2001, new chairman Pavel Koncoš openly demanded Schmögnerová's dismissal, which Dzurinda refused, but to which Schmögnerová eventually acquiesced by resigning five months before the 2002 parliamentary elections. The rift between supporters and opponents of the government within the SDĽ came to a head when ex-chairman Peter Weiss,

Schmögnerová, and their followers left to form the Social Democratic Alliance (SDA) in protest against the party leadership for the upcoming elections. While the rump SDĽ contested the 2002 election with a renewed left-of-center programmatic profile, its ability to maintain this position had suffered lasting damage in its four years in government. Haughton (2004) refers in this vein to the SDĽ's insistence on occupying the Finance Ministry both times when in government (1994, 1998–2002) as a key strategic mistake that undermined its center-left programmatic appeal.

The electoral demise of the SDĽ in the 2002 election was sealed by its outflanking on the socioeconomic left by the Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS) and crowding-out by Smer (Direction), founded in 2001 by ex-SDĽ and now independent MP Robert Fico and his associates. Smer's discourse featured a centrist populism that, while rejecting the Dzurinda government's privatizations, identified "stealing" as a problem common to all post-1989 governments of both the "left" and the "right," exemplified in its famous billboard slogan "As they stole under Mečiar, so they steal under Dzurinda." Smer claimed to represent a "Third Way" beyond left and right, taking up the SDĽ's unfulfilled promises of a "social state" and public investment in job creation while also echoing liberal demands for a reduction of state bureaucracy. The KSS, on the other hand, explicitly positioned itself as "the only truly left-wing party in Slovakia" and likewise took up unfulfilled "social justice" demands with a more radical twist, such as calling for state ownership of over 50% of key industries (Komunistická strana Slovenska 2002). In this manner, two parties with different ideological profiles squeezed out the SDĽ from both sides of the socioeconomic spectrum in an election campaign fought largely over the government's divisive economic record. While the CHES data do not feature the SDĽ for 2002, one postelection study suggests the scale of the SDĽ's losses to Smer in particular, with some 25% of the SDĽ's 1998 voters opting for Smer in 2002, compared to only about 18% for the SDĽ (see appendix: table 2).

The SDĽ was thus squeezed out of its programmatic space and crashed out of parliament with 1.4% vote in the 2002 elections.[3] In the aftermath of the reelection of a center-right coalition, Smer altered its ideological branding by abandoning centrist populism and explicitly identifying with the "left" and "social democracy"; in this context, the rump SDĽ, having been overtaken on the level of both programmatic content and ideological self-identification, decided to merge into Smer in December 2004, which in turn rebranded itself as "Smer – Social Democracy" and went on to successfully occupy the

3 Given the timing of the SDĽ's electoral demise, the party is not included in the CHES survey, which begins in 2002; therefore, we have not included CHES figures for Slovakia.

left-of-center socioeconomic and moderately nationalist programmatic space over the next decade – largely absorbing the electorates of the HZDS and KSS in the process (Marušiak 2006; Rybář and Deegan-Krause 2008).

Poland

The 2001 Polish parliamentary elections already signaled a series of shifts in the party system as the collapse of the AWS gave rise to competing forces of the center-right, with the Civic Platform (PO) staking out an economically liberal position, while Law and Justice (PiS) combined national conservatism with a broadly social-welfarist profile. The new SLD-PSL government, while continuing a broadly market- and EU-oriented agenda, suffered from persistently high unemployment and public fallout from austerity measures to balance the deficit and a series of high-profile scandals such as the Rywin affair. In this context, PiS articulated a moralized opposition to not only the government, but also the entire post-1989 order, arguing that regardless of which party was in power, "the old state apparatus as well as informal networks and interest groups" had remained in place and sustained a corrupt system of "political postcommunist capitalism" (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość 2005: 7). This populist discourse called for a "cleansing of the state" followed by an "empowering of the state" to institute sweeping anticorruption measures, but also to invest in job creation, housing, and family support schemes – taking up unfulfilled promises from all the years of SLD-led government. PiS thus outflanked the SLD to the left socioeconomically while pulling the axis of competition toward a sociocultural logic with its radicalized moral conservatism. In the late stages of campaigning for the 2005 parliamentary (and subsequent presidential) elections, PiS articulated a divide between "social Poland" and "liberal Poland," positioning itself as a social-welfarist and social-conservative pole against the likewise ascendant PO, attacking the latter's liberal economic policies such as the flat tax of 15% (Szczerbiak 2007). The PO, for its part, positioned itself as the electorally most viable socially liberal alternative to PiS's divisive conservatism, effectively crowding out the SLD on the sociocultural dimension. This combination of socioeconomic outflanking by PiS and sociocultural crowding-out by the PO can be seen with the CHES data (see appendix: figure 1) and postelection surveys showing large and roughly equal losses to PiS and the PO (see appendix: table 3). The SLD, reduced to just 11% in the 2005 parliamentary elections, was thus squeezed out by the displacement of the postcommunist/post-Solidarity divide onto one pitting social welfarism and social conservatism against economic and cultural liberalism. This divide, in turn, has persisted to the present, with PiS's discourse continuing to articulate a "social" vs. "liberal" divide and taking on an increasingly authoritarian and social-welfarist accent through its

current term in government since 2015. The SLD subsequently tried to position itself as the standard-bearer of "the left" on both the socioeconomic and the sociocultural dimensions, but again suffered electorally when it was outflanked on the sociocultural left in 2011 by the centrist-libertarian Palikot's Movement and on both dimensions in 2015 by the left-libertarian Razem (see appendix: figure 1). In 2015, the SLD even failed to enter parliament for the first time as the "United Left" alliance (including the remnants of Palikot's decimated outfit) fell below the 8% threshold for alliances, returning to parliament in 2019 only after forming another alliance with two left-wing parties that had been outpolling it.

Hungary

After the 2002 elections, the newly elected MSZP-SZDSZ government led by Péter Medgyessy immediately implemented a series of spending pledges with its "100 Days Program," including pension and public-sector wage rises. These measures were popular, leading to high approval ratings for the government even in spite of the revelations of Medgyessy's secret police past that emerged shortly after the elections, and largely enjoyed the backing of the Fidesz-MDF opposition. The MSZP thus bucked the regional trend by following through with its left-of-center socioeconomic profile on the policy level and subsequently winning reelection in 2006 with 43% of the vote. Ferenc Gyurcsány, Medgyessy's successor who led the party to victory in 2006, created uproar five months after the election, however, following the leaking of an expletive-filled secret speech to MSZP MPs in which he berated himself and the party for lying about the country's finances in order to win reelection. Here, a critical phase set in, during which Gyurcsány remained in office despite mass protests demanding his resignation and imposed severe budget cuts that ran contrary to the MSZP's own promises. In this context, Fidesz outflanked the MSZP to the left socioeconomically with a full-fledged social-populist discourse that pitted "the people" and "the new majority" suffering under austerity against "the new aristocracy" in power continuing to enjoy its privileges. Fidesz, which had undergone a shift from "civic Hungary" to a "plebeian" discourse, articulated the people vs. aristocracy divide in stark socioeconomic terms of poor/rich in addition to work/non-work (Enyedi 2015). When the MSZP-SZDSZ government introduced hospital and tuition fees, Fidesz successfully initiated a 2008 referendum on reversing these measures (clearing the turnout threshold), forcing the government to relent despite Gyurcsány's insistence that there was no money to cover the expenses. In the period immediately following the 2006 elections, therefore, Fidesz overtook the MSZP on the left of the socioeconomic dimension, which also became the main axis of competition (see

appendix: figure 2). By the time of the 2010 elections, with the rise of Jobbik as an economically left-wing and radical ethno-nationalist party (Varga 2014) and the emergence of Politics Can Be Different (LMP) – both of which positioned themselves socioeconomically to the left of the MSZP – the axis of competition had shifted toward the contrasting positions on the sociocultural dimension. The MSZP, similarly to the SLD in Poland, suffered massively from a double outflanking on the socioeconomic left by Fidesz and Jobbik and on the sociocultural left by LMP (see appendix: figure 2). At the 2010 elections, the MSZP lost an estimated 12.5% of its 2006 electorate to Fidesz, 8.8% to Jobbik, and 5.2% to LMP (see appendix: table 4). The MSZP/Fidesz bipolarity thus gave way to a more fragmented post-2010 field in which differences are concentrated on the sociocultural dimension rather than economic left/right, from the competing nationalisms of Fidesz and Jobbik to varying accents of social-liberal opposition to Fidesz (MSZP, LMP, DK, Momentum) – with the MSZP contesting subsequent parliamentary elections in various anti-Fidesz alliances.

The Resilient/Fallen (Semi-)Pariahs: Germany (PDS/Linke), Czech Republic (KSČM)

Despite often being classified under a single type such as "orthodox socialist" (Kitschelt 2002) or "non-reformed" successor party (Bozóki and Ishiyama 2002), the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) in Germany and the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) in the Czech Republic constitute two distinct successor-party types that, in their own ways and contrary to the predictions of the aforementioned studies, succeeded in establishing a stable and electorally viable programmatic appeal to the socioeconomic left of their social-democratic competitors (Kim 2017). The PDS maintained a socioeconomically left-wing and socioculturally libertarian positioning and was able to outflank the Social Democrats (SPD) on the socioeconomic left at a national level in 2005 following organizational changes that enabled it to break out of its de facto "regional milieu party" status (Neugebauer and Stöss 1996) via an east-west alliance with left-wing SPD dissidents, with the 2007 merger giving rise to Die Linke as a second-order successor-party. The KSČM, on the other hand, occupied a socioeconomically left-wing and socioculturally conservative position and benefited electorally from a pronounced oppositional positioning in the wake of Social Democrat-led (ČSSD) governments in particular. In the realigning election of 2017, however, the KSČM suffered from outflanking on the sociocultural right by Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) as the axis of competition shifted away from the socioeconomic dimension – a trend that culminated with the 2021 election. Our analysis thus foregrounds programmatic-based interactions in conjunction with government/opposition signaling

and the relevance of the organizational dimension emphasized in the previous literature in taking into account the regional/national dynamics in the special case of Germany.

In their first phase (1989–98), both the PDS and the KSČM established their respective programmatic identities while remaining unable to pose much of an electoral challenge to their Social Democratic (SPD and ČSSD) competitors. The PDS rapidly adopted a democratic-socialist programmatic orientation under the Gysi/Bisky/Brie leadership; as the successor party in the former East Germany, its organizational and electoral base was lopsidedly concentrated in the eastern states, yet it faced the key constraint of the 5%/3-seat threshold for proportional representation (applied nationally with the exception of the first post-unification elections of 1990). In this context, the PDS sought to expand both within its eastern base and into newer western pastures through a programmatic emphasis on eastern interests on the one hand (a case in point being the Rostock Manifesto of 1998) and a wide-ranging economic and cultural profile to the left of both the SPD and the Greens on the other. However, it remained organizationally and socio-structurally tied to a center/periphery divide in the German party system and could not escape the status of a de facto "regional milieu party" (Neugebauer and Stöss 1996; Niedermayer 1998; Patton 1998).

Within the KSČM, chairman Jiří Svoboda's efforts (1990–93) to change the party's name and programmatic orientation from a communist to a democratic-socialist one failed against the resistance of a largely antireform executive and membership base, with Svoboda replaced as chairman in 1993 by Miroslav Grebeníček (1993–2005) and then Vojtěch Filip (2005–present) from the "neocommunist" mainstream of the party (Kunštát 2013: 182–186). The KSČM, following this confirmation of its non-reformed status in 1993, was overtaken electorally by Miloš Zeman's ČSSD by 1996 as a moderate social-democratic alternative on the socioeconomic left that also categorically ruled out all cooperation with "extremist political parties" – including the KSČM – in its Bohumín congress resolution of 1995.

The entry of the SPD and the ČSSD into government in both countries in 1998 altered the competitive field, inaugurating a second phase (1998–2006) in which the PDS and the KSČM pursued variations on a "vacuum thesis" strategy of occupying the left-wing socioeconomic void created by the rightward drift of their Social Democratic competitors in government (Kim 2017). The PDS already deployed this strategy with relative success in the 1998 elections, positioning itself as a "socialist opposition" against the SPD-led government-in-waiting of Gerhard Schröder's *Neue Mitte* and reaching a pre-2005 peak of 5.1% of the vote, while remaining limited by the lopsided concentration of its electorate

in the east. In the 1998 Czech elections, the ČSSD became the largest party for the first time with 32.3% of the vote but could not form a parliamentary majority, leading to the so-called Opposition Agreement that allowed for a ČSSD minority government tolerated by the right-wing Civic Democrats (ODS). In this context, the KSČM reinforced its oppositional profile on the economic left, adopting in 1999 a "Program of Renewal" promising full employment through massive public investment in job creation and then contesting the 2002 elections with a highly oppositional campaign alleging that "the ODS has basically governed thanks to the Opposition Agreement" (Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy 2002). The KSČM was able to benefit electorally from this intensification of its programmatic outflanking of a ruling ČSSD on the socioeconomic left (see appendix: figure 3), peaking at 18.5% of the vote in 2002 and drawing some 11% of this electorate from those who voted ČSSD in 1998 (see appendix: table 5).

The considerable losses of both the PDS and the KSČM despite continuing Social Democratic incumbency in the 2002 German and 2006 Czech elections, respectively, can likewise be attributed to government/opposition signaling, in addition to a combination of programmatic and organizational factors in the PDS case. In the context of a highly personalized two-horse race between Chancellor Schröder and Bavarian premier Edmund Stoiber in 2002, the PDS sent ambiguous signals with slogans such as "Whoever wants to prevent Stoiber must vote PDS," making it unclear to its supporters "how Stoiber could be prevented and the reentry of the PDS into the Bundestag secured at the same time" (Neugebauer and Stöss 2003: 144). One result of this was massive ballot-splitting among PDS voters and a reverse "vacuum" whereby the PDS lost about 300,000 of its 1998 voters in the east alone to the SPD (Neugebauer and Stöss 2003: 144–46). This was helped on a semi-programmatic level by Schröder's energetic response to the floods that hit eastern Germany, as well as the PDS's organizational weakening by the resignations of Bisky as chairman (2000) and Gysi from all offices (2002). The KSČM (2006), for its part, sank below 13% at the 2006 elections after sending ambivalent signals suggesting its "responsibility of a strong left-wing party" to work somehow with the ČSSD against the "neoliberal, right-wing politics" of the ODS – despite the ČSSD's unchanged refusal to work with the KSČM and its status as ruling party in coalition with two smaller center-right parties since 2002.

Within this second phase, the PDS was able to attain a new level of electoral success through its alliance and later merger with the WASG, a left-wing breakaway grouping from the SPD, which allowed it to move organizationally beyond the status of "regional milieu party" and outflank the SPD on the socioeconomic left at a national level in the 2005 elections. The PDS-WASG cooperation

negotiations, beginning in May 2005, were a top-down process centered on the national executive as the sole decision-making body until an extraordinary congress was convened in July to ratify the results (Hübner and Strohschneider 2007). The formation of the Left Party. PDS alliance was made possible by a delayed onset of organizational centralization after 2002 that strengthened the party in national office and put it in a position to forge the alliance under extreme time pressure after early September elections were called in late May 2005. Through the east-west alliance and subsequent merger, the PDS acquired, above all, organizational and leadership assets that allowed it – even with little programmatic change – to outflank the ruling SPD on the socioeconomic left at a national (and no longer just regional) level, especially in relation to the government's neoliberal labor-market reforms (see appendix: figure 4). At the 2005 elections, the Left Party.PDS drew an estimated 28% of its electorate from 2002 SPD voters (see appendix: table 6). In an organizational sense, the PDS-WASG merger of 2007 marks the end of the PDS as a successor party for our analysis and the emergence of Die Linke as a second-order successor party.

The third phase of the KSČM's development (2006–present) is marked by electoral stagnation and a critical phase beginning with the 2017 elections, as the party is outflanked on the sociocultural right by Tomio Okamura's Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) and arguably crowded out on the socioeconomic left by both ANO and SPD. From the 2010 elections onward, the rise of populist newcomers signals a reshuffling of the Czech party system as the previously dominant socioeconomic divide is partially displaced by an oldness/newness one and the field of competitors for disaffected ČSSD voters becomes more crowded. Andrej Babiš's ANO contested the 2013 and 2017 elections with a broadly Keynesian demand-management agenda tied to a populist divide pitting "the hardworking" against the ("traditional") "parties" and "politicians," whereas Okamura's Dawn (later SPD) radicalized a similar anti-"parties" populism onto an aggressively anti-immigration, anti-Roma, anti-Islam, and eventually also anti-EU discourse, coupled with a protectionist socioeconomic agenda (Kim 2020). The KSČM, even though it likewise rejected the entry of refugees into the Czech Republic, was thus outflanked on the sociocultural right by SPD as this dimension became more important in the 2017 elections (see appendix: figure 3), while arguably also being crowded out on the economic dimension by both ANO and SPD (though the CHES data do not capture this). The KSČM suffered its most severe decline yet and fell below 8% of the vote in 2017, losing about 5% of its 2013 electorate to ANO and SPD, respectively (see appendix: table 5). In 2021 it failed to enter parliament after four years of giving confidence-and-supply backing to an ANO-ČSSD coalition government,

thus losing its oppositional socioeconomic profile in addition to the sociocultural outflanking and socioeconomic crowding-out they had already suffered.

The Fluctuating Giant: Romania (PSD)

Identifying the successor party in Romania is more challenging than in the other cases (Pop-Eleches 2008). Shortly after the 1989 revolution, the Romanian Communist Party (PCR) was outlawed and no party claimed its legacy. The National Salvation Front (FSN), founded by reformers within the PCR and established as the first postrevolutionary government, took over the organizational resources of the PCR but defined itself in opposition to its legacy. To further complicate the line of succession, a personal conflict between Prime Minister Petre Roman and President Ion Iliescu led to a 1992 split in the FSN and two parties emerging from its ranks, which would later become the Democratic Party (PD) and the Social Democratic Party (PSD). From an organizational perspective, Gherghina (2013: 188) argues that ultimately, "PSD ended up with a relevant organizational heritage similar to that of the other successor parties in the region." Given this organizational continuity, we follow other authors and limit our analysis here to the development of the PSD (Pop-Eleches 1998; Ishiyama 1999). We identify four periods in the PSD's development, each corresponding to a distinct phase of party competition and electoral success.

In the first period (1992–2004), party competition mostly developed in line with the expectations of the previous literature regarding successor parties in patrimonial regimes: the PSD relied on clientelistic practices to shelter its supporters from the costs of transformation while deploying a diffuse mix of national-conservative and left-of-center economic policies. In this period, the postcommunist/anticommunist divide dominated party competition and the PSD's fortunes were strongly tied to Ion Iliescu, the two-and-a-half-term President of Romania (1990–96, 2000–04). For most of this period, except one legislative term, the PSD was in government (1992–96, 2000–04), during which it avoided shock-therapy measures and opted for a gradual economic transformation under the slogan "We are not selling our country." Its period in government was additionally characterized by semi-authoritarian practices, such as the deployment of Jiu Valley miners to quell antigovernment protests in Bucharest, leading observers to question the party's democratic commitment.

With the election of Traian Băsescu as President of Romania in 2004, the PSD entered the second phase of its development (2004–09), characterized by its inability to gain enough support to head the government or win the presidency in a shifting context of party competition. Băsescu's radical opposition to the PSD had three important aspects (Borbáth 2019). Firstly, Băsescu appropriated

the anticorruption agenda from the far-right Greater Romania Party (PRM) and directed it against the PSD as a proxy for anticommunism. The anticorruption agenda of PRM and later Băsescu represented a politicization of previously formed clientelistic linkages, and while not constituting a dimensional conflict in the socioeconomic or sociocultural mold, the appearance of this issue led to a transformation of the issue agenda of electoral politics. Secondly, Băsescu's reinterpretation of the role of the presidency and willingness to depart from the practices of previous presidents brought together opposition parties at least in temporary alliance against him, which led the PSD to search for allies in the ranks of right-wing parties and even support the minority National Liberal (PNL) government in parliament (2007–08). Thirdly, after the PD had already joined the anticommunist coalition government in 1996, Băsescu led the party out of the Socialist International into the European People's Party, leaving the PSD as the only Romanian party identifying as social-democratic.

Ahead of the 2009 presidential elections, PSD entered the third phase of its development (2009–14), characterized by its strategy of positioning itself as a left-wing counterpole to the economic crisis management of the right. After the PDL-UDMR government (2009–12) with the support of President Băsescu implemented radical austerity measures, its popularity plummeted (Borbáth 2018). In this context, the relevance of the postcommunist/anticommunist divide declined and the PSD and PNL formed an alliance on the basis of common opposition to the government's austerity measures and to President Băsescu. The Social Liberal Union (USL) of PSD and PNL thus brought together not only opposing sides of the postcommunist/anticommunist divide, but also two parties that even in 2010, according to the CHES data, were farthest apart in terms of their socioeconomic – and to some extent sociocultural – positions (see appendix: figure 5). The PSD-PNL Grand Coalition thus represented an extreme form of crowding-out that reached across the mainly socioeconomic axis of competition to squeeze out the PDL. The 2012 parliamentary elections saw a USL landslide with 58.6% of the vote. According to postelection survey data (see appendix: table 7), the USL drew nearly 10% of its 2012 electorate from 2008 PDL voters and managed to mobilize a large segment of previous non-voters (corresponding to 25% of USL voters).[4] Once in government, the USL reversed most of the austerity policies of the previous government.

4 In the 2012 elections, the People's Party-Dan Diaconescu (PP-DD) entered parliament with 14% of the vote, combining a conservative sociocultural position with a left-wing socioeconomic appeal and outflanking the PSD along the latter dimension. Despite the PP-DD gaining some PSD voters (see appendix: table 7), neither PRM nor PP-DD posed a lasting challenge to the PSD: the PRM focused on cultural issues in a period when the axis of competition was more economic (see appendix: figure 5), while the PP-DD collapsed after Diaconescu's failure to enter parliament.

The latest phase of the PSD's development (2014–present) is characterized by the reemergence and increasing dominance of the issue of corruption in party competition, with President Klaus Iohannis (PNL) and the Save Romania Union (USR) mobilizing on anticorruption agendas against the PSD. The year 2014 marks a turning point in this regard, as the breakup of the PSD-PNL alliance led to a reunified right that threw its backing behind Iohannis against PSD Prime Minister Victor Ponta in the presidential race. Ponta lost after a largely ethnicized and cultural (rather than socioeconomic) campaign against the non-"Orthodox," non-"Romanian" Iohannis. With a similar campaign, in 2016, PSD managed to win the parliamentary elections with a combination of social-welfarist economic policies and a national-conservative messaging. The PSD landslide with 45% of the vote showed the stability of the party's electorate (see appendix: table 7). In its second consecutive term in government, the PSD continued with moderately left-of-center economic policies, such as in raising the minimum wage, but also tried to weaken some of the institutions tasked with fighting corruption. The latter move led to large-scale protests and a severe erosion of public support for the party. The protest dynamic fed into the PNL's and USR's strategy of shifting and reducing the axis of competition onto a corruption/anticorruption axis revolving around the corrupt rule of the PSD (capped by the criminal conviction and imprisonment of PSD leader Liviu Dragnea in May 2019). Although the PSD subsequently went into decline, it was able to maintain its status as the dominant (indeed the sole) socioeconomically left-of-center party, receiving just below 30% in the 2020 parliamentary elections.

A Typology of Postcommunist Successor Parties

Based on the in-depth discussion of the six cases presented above, we are now in a position to propose an updated typology of postcommunist successor parties in CEE in terms of 1) programmatic type and 2) electoral success level. We classify our six cases and identify four main programmatic types: 1) *conservative social democracy* (PSD); 2) *democratic socialism* (PDS); 3) *semi-authoritarian communism* (KSČM); and 4) *Third Way social liberalism* (MSZP, SDĽ, SLD). We differ from the above-discussed literature, which classifies the Hungarian, Polish, and Slovak successor parties as social-democratic, by identifying them as social-liberal in the European "Third Way" mold, characterized by an early commitment to far-reaching economic liberalization and privatization agendas, while oscillating between increased social spending promises on the one hand and fiscal contraction in government on the other. At the same time, these parties sought to position themselves in relative terms as the main forces of the left-of-center competitive space along both the socioeconomic and

TABLE 1 Typology of Post-Communist Successor Parties in CEE

Country	Programmatic profile	Party-system status (incl. change)
Czech Republic	Semi-authoritarian communism	Mid-size pariah party -> Mid-size semi-pariah party
Germany	Democratic socialism	Small pariah party -> Mid-size semi-pariah party
Hungary	Third Way social liberalism	Dominant center-left party -> Mid-size alliance party
Poland	Third Way social liberalism	Dominant center-left party -> Small alliance party
Romania	Conservative social democracy	Semi-authoritarian ruling party -> Dominant center-left party
Slovakia	Third Way social liberalism	Mid-size alliance party -> Small party

sociocultural dimensions. Here, the related aspect of electoral success level comes in: while the Hungarian and Polish successor parties managed to establish themselves as *dominant center-left parties* in the absence of major competition to their socioeconomic left, they quickly declined to the status of *small alliance parties* hovering around 10% of the vote (even with the help of electoral coalitions with other parties) after being overtaken on the socioeconomic left by their main competitors from the sociocultural right.

What the analysis of the six cases shows is that changes in party type mostly occur in terms of the level of electoral success, reflecting developments unaccounted for by the previous path-dependent literature, which we explain in terms of the programmatic-based competitive interactions summarized in Table 1. In addition to the steep decline from *dominant center-left party* to *small alliance party* (MSZP, SLD), we observe a change from *mid-size alliance party* to *small party* (to ultimately non-existent) in the case of the Slovak Party of the Democratic Left (SDĽ), which lost its parliamentary representation in 2002 and subsequently merged into Smer. The Czech KSČM and the German PDS, in contrast, advanced from the status of *mid-size* or *small pariah parties* to electorally consolidated *mid-size semi-pariahs* no longer ruled out from coalitions at the national level, before declining to a *small semi-pariah* (KSČM) or merging into Die Linke (PDS). In addition to these broadly identifiable trends, the conservative social-democratic PSD in Romania has retained its status as

dominant center-left party, while exhibiting fluctuations in electoral success depending on programmatic-based interactions – including the politicization by its competitors of postcommunist "clientelism" as corruption.

Conclusion

Over three decades after the fall of the Wall, the electoral fortunes of postcommunist successor parties in CEE yield a considerably different picture than the accounts of the path-dependent literature of the early 2000s. Contrary to the diagnosis of highly successful "social-democratized" successor parties in Hungary, Poland, and (to lesser degrees of success) Slovakia, "ghetto"-like ones progressively dying out in the Czech Republic and Germany, and a stable "clientelism"-sustained one in Romania, we see successor parties that have suffered steep declines in Hungary and Poland, died out in Slovakia, stabilized in different ways before declining in the Czech Republic and Germany, and undergone fluctuations within high overall vote shares in Romania. We account for these trends within an explanatory framework that starts from an immanent critique of the previous literature's assumptions of path dependency: while we likewise foreground the dimension of programmatic identity for understanding successor-party success, we emphasize the relational nature of programmatic-based positionings in the party system relative to those of competitor parties. We thus take up from within the path-dependent literature Kitschelt's (1995) conceptualization of party competition as an "iterative signaling game" whereby programmatic-based party reputations can be maintained or lost over subsequent iterations of competitive interaction in the party system. We apply this perspective in qualitative case analyses of the six aforementioned successor-parties in conjunction with CHES data and postelection studies on voter flows, thus triangulating between three types of evidence in a mixed-methods approach.

There is a clear unifying theme in our analyses of the changing fortunes of the six successor parties, heterogeneous as they are: the question is not least whether nominally social-democratic parties – whether the successor parties themselves or their competitors – are able to maintain their left-of-center socioeconomic reputations in government. Our programmatic-based analysis thus partly confirms and complements the results of recent literature that has identified, from a class voting or managerial competence standpoint, the decline of postcommunist left-of-center parties in the region that pursued promarket reforms (Grzymala-Busse 2018; Snegovaya 2022). In all our cases of steep decline, the successor parties are outflanked on the socioeconomic left (Slovakia), possibly also in combination with outflanking or crowding-out

on the sociocultural left (Hungary and Poland), during their second stints in government. The Czech and (East-)German successor parties, both of which defied the neoliberal orthodoxy in different ways, experienced their biggest successes when they positioned themselves as a clear left-wing socioeconomic opposition to their ruling Social Democratic competitors. Conversely, the successful periods of the PSD in Romania and the anomaly of the MSZP's reelection in 2006 illustrate that incumbency status is not automatically punished if it is tied to a broadly social-welfarist agenda. At the same time, even cases of relative success on the basis of socioeconomic programmatic consistency can flip over into decline in conjunction with shifts in the axis of competition – either by their own doing, as with the PSD's anti-anticorruption overtures, or due to wider shifts in the competitive field as in the Czech Republic. In this sense, the only certainty is arguably the contingent and relational nature of party competition itself.

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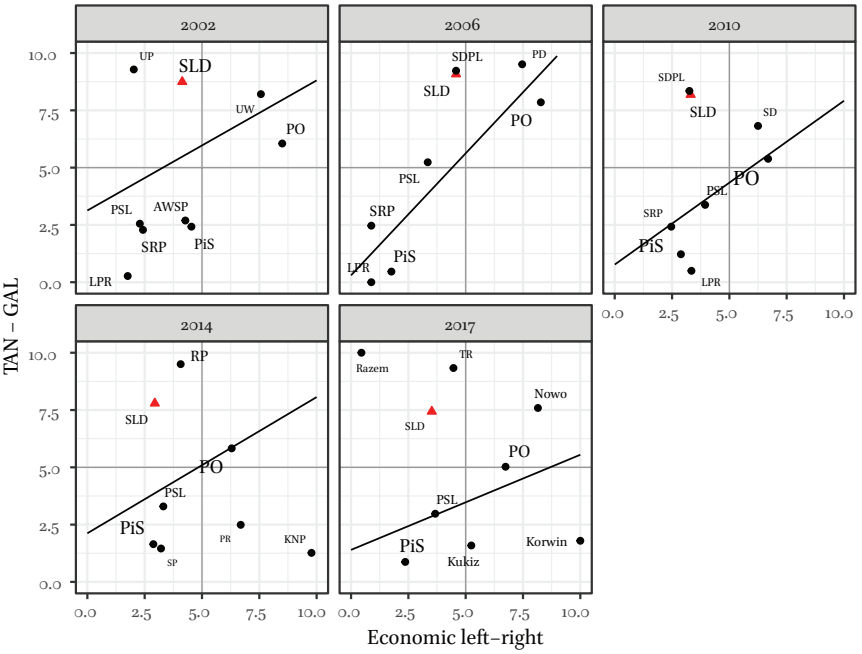
Illustrations

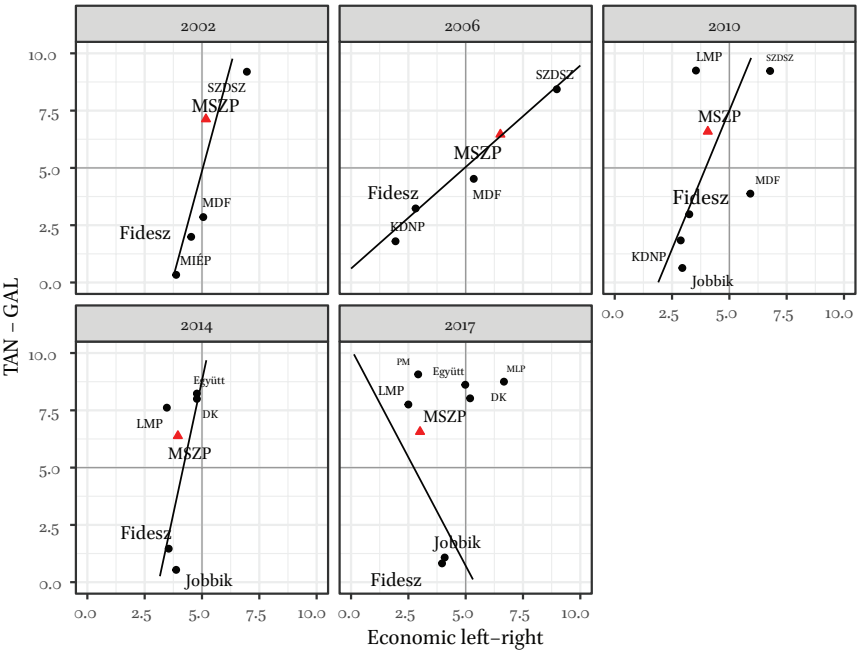
APPENDIX, TABLE 1 Summary of party-system interactions in the cases examined

Country	Election	Outflanking/ crowding out party	Outflanked/ crowded out party	Dimension	Type
Czech Republic	2002	*KSČM*	ČSSD	Socio-econ	Outflanking
Czech Republic	2017	SPD	*KSČM*	Socio-cult	Outflanking
Czech Republic	2017	SPD	*KSČM*	Socio-econ	Crowd. out
Czech Republic	2017	ANO	*KSČM*	Socio-econ	Crowd. out
Hungary	2010*	Fidesz	*MSZP*	Socio-econ	Outflanking
Hungary	2010	Jobbik	*MSZP*	Socio-econ	Outflanking
Hungary	2010	LMP	*MSZP*	Socio-econ	Outflanking
Germany	2005	*PDS*	SPD	Socio-econ	Outflanking
Poland	2005	PO	*SLD*	Socio-cult	Crowd. out
Poland	2005	PiS	*SLD*	Socio-econ	Outflanking
Poland	2011	Palikot	*SLD*	Socio-cult	Outflanking
Poland	2015	Razem	*SLD*	Both	Outflanking
Romania	2012	*PSD*-PNL	PDL	Socio-econ	Crowd. out
Romania	2012	PP-DD	*PSD*	Both	Outflanking
Slovakia	1994	ZRS	*SDĽ*	Socio-econ	Outflanking
Slovakia	2002	Smer	*SDĽ*	Socio-econ	Crowd. out
Slovakia	2002	KSS	*SDĽ*	Socio-econ	Outflanking

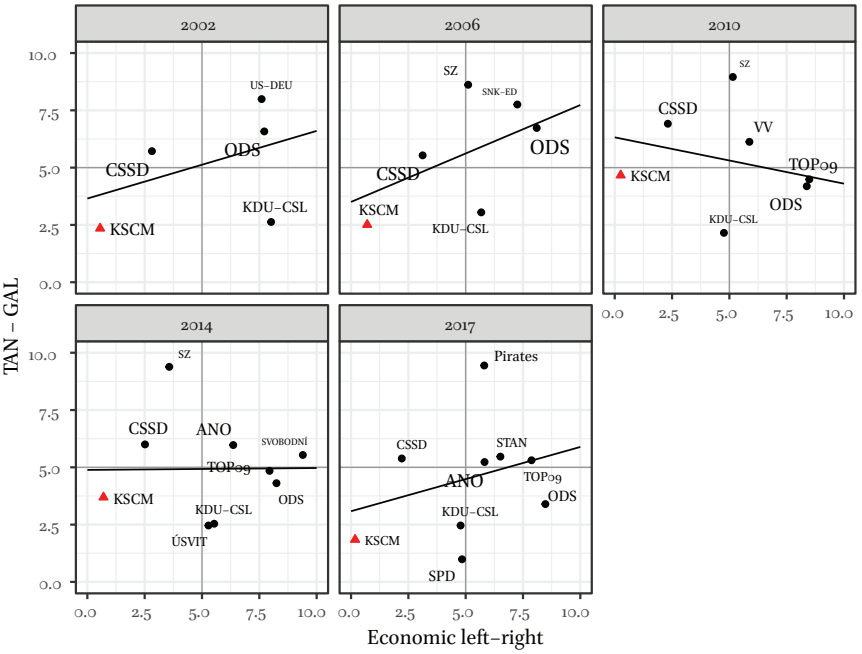
* This dynamic already started shortly after the 2006 parliamentary elections, which is also reflected in the 2006 CHES data.
The successor party is indicated with italics.



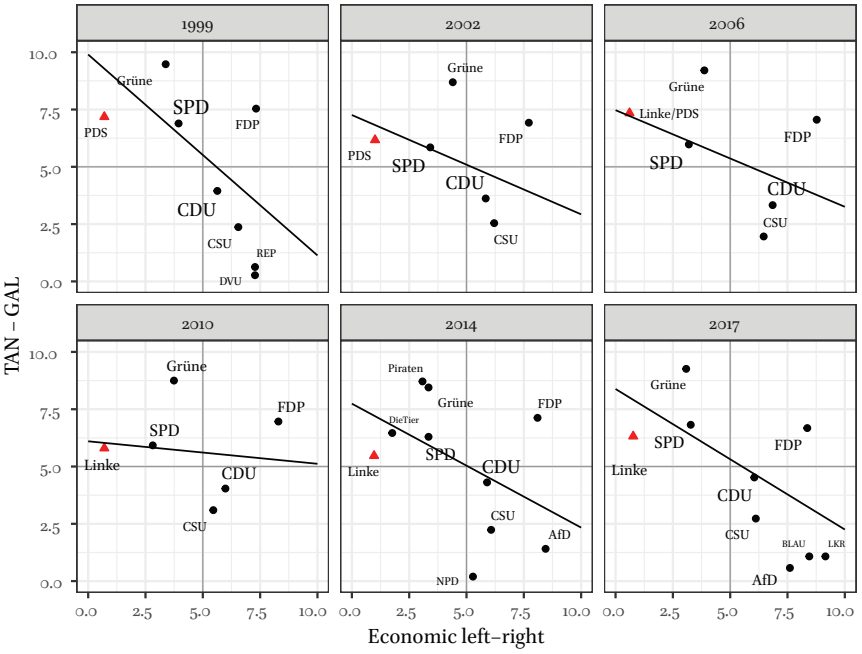
APPENDIX, FIGURE 1 Party system configuration in Poland based on the CHES survey



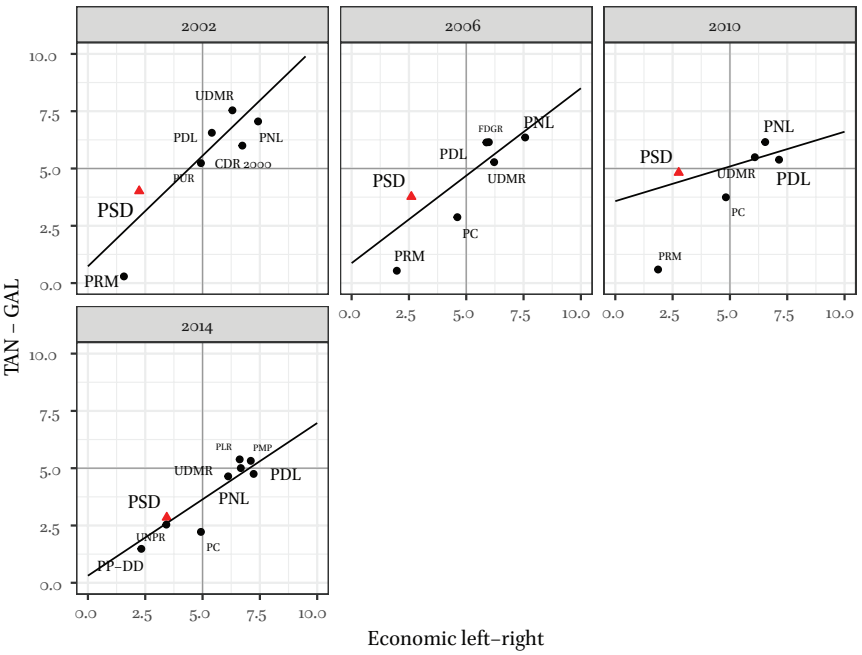
APPENDIX, FIGURE 2 Party system configuration in Hungary based on the CHES survey



APPENDIX, FIGURE 3 Party system configuration in the Czech Republic based on the CHES survey



APPENDIX, FIGURE 4 Party system configuration in Germany based on the CHES survey



APPENDIX, FIGURE 5 Party system configuration in Romania based on the CHES survey

Voter flows

To map voter flows, we rely on two indicators. On the one hand, we map losses, which show the extent to which the successor party lost its previous voters to competitor parties. This is expressed in terms of the percentage of voters who voted for party *p* in election *t* but voted for the successor party *s* in the previous election *t-1*.

$$losses_{p(t)} = \frac{N_{p(t)}}{N_{s(t-1)}} * 100$$

In addition, we map gains from party *p* as the percentage of voters who voted for party *p* in the previous election *t-1,* but supported the successor party *s* in election *t*.

$$gains_{p(t)} = \frac{N_{p(t-1)}}{N_{s(t)}} * 100$$

The two measures show individual-level changes that back up our (qualitative and CHES-based) analysis of programmatic-based outflanking or crowding out at a given election. In summary, the use of expert surveys, qualitative case analysis, and voter flows data allows us to triangulate between three different ways of measuring party-system interactions from a relational perspective.

APPENDIX, TABLE 2 Voter flows during the 2002 Slovak Parliamentary Elections

Party	Losses
Smer	25.3
KSS	13.8
SDA	9.7

SOURCE: HAUGHTON (2003) BASED ON DATA FROM THE DAILY NEWSPAPER *SME*.

APPENDIX, TABLE 3 Voter flows during the 2005 and 2011 Polish Parliamentary Elections

	2005 parliamentary election		2011 parliamentary election	
Party	Losses	Gains	Losses	Gains
SLD		67.9		53.8
PO	11.2	3.8	17.4	12.3
PSL	4.0	0.9	7.6	1.5
PIS	12.3		4.3	12.3
Palikot's Movement			8.7	
LPR	0.8			
SRP	4.8			
SDPL	4.5			
Other	3.7	1.9	1.1	1.5
Abstention	39.5	25.5	22.8	18.5

SOURCE: THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ELECTORAL SYSTEMS DOI:10.7804/CSES.IMD.2018-12-04

APPENDIX, TABLE 4 Voter flows during the 2010 Hungarian Parliamentary Elections

Party	Losses	Gains
MSZP		84.1
Fidesz	12.5	1.5
Jobbik	8.8	0.3
LMP	5.2	
MDF	1.6	1.6
SZDSZ		1.5
Other	0.6	
Abstention	12.1	11.0

SOURCE: HUNGARIAN NATIONAL ELECTION STUDY, CONDUCTED BETWEEN MARCH 30TH-APRIL 11TH, 2010 BY MEDIÁN AND SZONDA IPSOS

APPENDIX, TABLE 5 Voter flows during the 2002 and 2017 Czech Parliamentary Elections

	2002 parliamentary election		2017 parliamentary election	
Party	Losses	Gains	Losses	Gains
KSČM		66.1		84.5
ANO			5.3	1.4
ČSSD	1.1	11.3	1.0	4.2
ODS		2.4		
SPD			5.2	
STAN			3.2	
Pirates			0.9	
Other	2.2	1.6	4.4	1.4
Abstention	4.5	18.5	12.4	8.5

SOURCE: FOR 2002, THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ELECTORAL SYSTEMS, DOI:10.7804/CSES.IMD.2018-12-04; FOR 2017, THE CZECH NATIONAL ELECTION STUDY, CONDUCTED BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 10TH- JUNE 11TH, 2017 BY THE CENTRUM PRO VÝZKUM VEŘEJNÉHO MÍNĚNÍ

APPENDIX, TABLE 6 Voter flows during the 2005 German Federal Parliamentary Elections

	2005 parliamentary election	
Party	**Gains**	**Losses**
Left Party.PDS	34.1	
CDU/CSU	5.3	6.6
SPD	28.0	9.9
Greens	4.1	5.0
FDP		0.8
Pirates		
Other	2.0	0.8
Abstention	26.4	7.4

SOURCE: THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ELECTORAL SYSTEMS DOI:10.7804/CSES.IMD.2018-12-04

APPENDIX, TABLE 7 Voter flows during the 2012 and 2016 Romanian Parliamentary Elections

	2012 parliamentary election		2016 parliamentary election	
Party	**Losses**	**Gains**	**Losses**	**Gains**
PSD		49.8		89.3
PNL		14.0	4.0	7.2
PDL	1.1	9.4		1.7
PP-DD	6.0			
ALDE			5.3	
PMP			2.1	
USR			2.0	
UDMR		0.2		
Other	0.2	1.2	2.1	1.1
Abstention	10.5	25.4	2.1	0.7

SOURCE: FOR 2012, THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ELECTORAL SYSTEMS DOI:10.7804/CSES.IMD.2018-12-04; FOR 2016, THE ROMANIAN NATIONAL ELECTION STUDY, CONDUCTED BETWEEN DECEMBER 13TH 2016 - FEBRUARY 20TH 2017 BY THE CCSAS AND THE BABEŞ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY.