

The Only Game in Town: Party Politics in Hungary¹

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INTRODUCTION

The decline of party thesis, born as it was in the established Western democracies, portrays a world where environmental change makes it impossible for ageing dinosaurs to hold on to their niche. Some lucky mutants survive on isolated islands, but the inertia instilled by a long period of ascendancy makes successful adaptation unlikely. This vision assumes a past where political parties often played a crucial role not only in the functioning of democracy, but more broadly in the development of mass societies and the consolidation of modern states (Apter 1965: 186ff). In such cases – for instance, in some former colonies after World War II - party competition was one of the mechanisms that facilitated the transformation of isolated communities and deeply divided casts, classes or orders into a nationally conscious citizenry. This historical role was possible, claims the standard interpretation, because many political parties did not confine their activity to purely political matters but engaged in providing social services (social security, education, entertainment and so forth) for their constituencies.

The contrast could not be greater with party politics in Hungary. During the wave of democratization in East Central Europe that began in 1989, citizens were already incorporated, mobilized, activated and politicized (Mair 1997: 180), and a unified national political market was already in existence at the onset of electoral competition. Political parties have usually played a marginal role in citizens' everyday life ever since, and even their contribution to the consolidation of democratic rule is questionable (Tóka 1997). Some sceptics – especially advocates of

corporatist-style arrangements - go still further and argue that the party system sometimes represents a dysfunctional element in the developing East European social order and destabilizes the political system (Kulcsár 1997). In their view, the feeble new political parties just impose their volatile needs on an already overloaded governmental system, and do not serve as channels of interest aggregation and co-ordination between branches of government.

In this chapter we explore these issues from the perspective of Hungarian party politics.² Without claiming that a single country can represent a whole region, we do not see Hungary as an atypical outlier in East Central Europe. Although the Hungarian parties of today are largely the same organizations that were the chief actors during the transition to democracy (see Tables X.1 and X.2), under this surface of continuity in party names the fluidity characterizing postcommunist party politics has been easily discernible. A brief headcount of the relevant parties will suffice to see that splits, mergers, major changes in ideology or coalition partners, and extraordinarily high volatility shook all of them, and fundamentally altered their place in the party system. Despite this apparent fragility of individual parties, parties as institutions became, in Hungary at least, by far the most important players in the political process.

[Tables X.1 and X.2 about here]

The ruling party of the communist period had been overhauled half a year before the first free elections in March-April 1990, when its last congress dissolved the party and transformed it into the founding conference of the legal heir, the reformist Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP). Less than one in every eight members bothered to re-register as MSZP members, and an orthodox wing set up its own party that contested every national election since 1990 and collected up to 4

percent of the vote, but otherwise had no political relevance. The continuity between today's ex-communist party and its communist-era predecessor is among the weakest in the postcommunist region (Grzymala-Busse 2002).

Following the 1990 election the parties of the right (MDF, FKGP and KDNP) were able to form a government.³ All three of them, however, had come to the brink of electoral extinction by the turn of the new century. The demise of the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) was rooted mainly in the deep unpopularity of the 1990-1994 governments, but did not stop after the landslide opposition victory in the 1994 election. The Democratic Forum (MDF) and the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP) were further weakened by party splits over policy issues and coalition strategy, and by 1998 could only enter parliament through an electoral alliance with a formerly liberal party.

The agrarian-populist Independent Smallholders' Party (FKGP) had already left the original coalition by early 1992. The government of the day only retained its legislative majority because three-quarters of the FKGP deputies defied their party and remained on the government benches. Party leader József Torgyán led his party back into another right-wing coalition in 1998, but internal battles and scandals surrounding the party's governmental activities made the FKGP disappear from parliament in the 2002 election. So did the Party of Hungarian Justice and Life (MIÉP) - a far-right splinter from MDF - after a short tenure in the 1998-2002 parliament.

The two parties representing the liberal pole in the early 1990s suffered fewer factional disputes, but altered considerably in their ideological orientation and coalition preferences. By 1992, the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ) had evidently decided that the MSZP was a far lesser evil than the Christian-nationalist parties, and in 1994 it joined a coalition government with the socialists. This led to a break-up of the already shaky alliance with the Alliance of Young

Democrats (FIDESZ), which, after 1992, gradually adopted the policy agenda and rhetoric of the Christian-nationalist parties. The party changed its name to Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Party (Fidesz-MPP) in 1995, and to Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Union (Fidesz-MPSZ) in 2003,⁴ and established itself as a centre-right formation capable of attracting large numbers of voters from all segments of the political arena. Meanwhile the SZDSZ became a relatively small and marginalized party emphatically rejected by the right as a possible coalition partner.

Hence inter-party relations changed considerably, but not chaotically. The non-communist parties emerged while the main (or only) relevant political divide concerned the speed and goals of the transition. Consequently, the ex-communists constituted one pole, and the radical opposition of the period (SZDSZ, FIDESZ, FKGP) the other. It was not the inherent instability of the party system, but the end of the transition that altered the political agenda and replaced the previous system of alliances with something else. In the 1991-93 period, the traditionalist pole - i.e. the Christian-social KDNP, the agrarian-populist FKGP and the conservative-nationalist MDF - were pitted against the two liberal parties on the one hand, and the socialists on the other.

The gradual return to a bipolar system of alliances after 1993 is best interpreted as a natural adaptation, in the absence of deep cleavages cross-cutting each other, to institutional variables that are largely cemented by the constitutional requirement of a two-thirds majority to alter them (cf. Tóka 2004). To avoid being sidelined, the smaller parties must, at least for the second round of elections, join an electoral bloc that has a chance of winning most single-member seats. Although the predominant element of the electoral system is list proportional representation with a 5 percent legal threshold, the average district size and the method of seat allocation are rather unfavourable for parties with less than 10 percent of the vote (Tóka 1995). In addition, over 45 percent of the seats are allocated to single-member districts. The winner in the median single-

member district can expect a hefty bonus in terms of seats, and the ticket leader of the biggest party in a new parliament has, according to the emerging informal convention, the right to be first to attempt to form a government – indeed they always ended up as the new premier. Once installed, the prime minister can only be removed by a constructive vote of no confidence, thus making his seat very secure indeed, and there is no second chamber, federal division of power or a strong presidency to weaken his authority.⁵

The concentration of the executive power favoured the parties that could present a clear and self-sufficient alternative to the government of the day, and strengthened the prevailing winner-takes-all logic of the party competition. This logic is manifested by a high degree of partisan penetration into the public service and by adversarial inter-party relations. Accommodation between government and opposition occurs rarely, and then only on issues of low salience or legislation requiring a super-majority. Every election but one has, so far, brought about a straight alternation of government and (some) opposition parties (see Table X.2). At least a few issue domains divide the major party alternatives predictably, consistently, and emphatically (Tóka 2004). Last but not least, no coalition, as yet, has bridged the sociocultural left-right divide.

THE POPULAR LEGITIMACY OF HUNGARIAN POLITICAL PARTIES

Most symptoms associated with party decline characterized Hungarian politics during the last decade more than they did Western Europe. Electoral volatility was high throughout the 1990s, emotional attachment to parties among the majority of the voters was loose, and citizen involvement in party politics and elections was low. Under communism, the development of a comprehensive welfare state, secularization, and the atomization of society via the erosion of communal forms of entertainment, associational life and collective identities progressed further

than in most of the West. Thus, the constraints on the parties' capacity to anchor themselves to specific social groups may be even higher in Hungary than in most of the modern world. Whether due to these obstacles, or simply because of the lack of will, Hungarian parties have established only weak links with most of their supporters.

The combined membership of all parliamentary parties has normally been around 2-3 percent of the electorate, or a percentage point higher if all the smaller parties are added.⁶ Many civic organizations are, at least informally, affiliated with parties (Enyedi 1996, 2005), but their membership is rather small, leaving the bulk of the population outside the reach of party organization.

While comparable to contemporary British, Dutch, French, German or even Vietnamese data (see Derbyshire and Derbyshire 1996: 99), Hungarian party membership figures are invariably referred to as 'low' or 'very low' in domestic political discourse. Regionally concentrated weaknesses in the membership base almost certainly were the reason for the recurrent failure of the FKGP, the KDNP and the MIÉP to field candidates in every single member district in national elections, and a major obstacle to greater partisan penetration of local politics in the villages. But the price that the parties actually pay for their relatively low membership figures must be estimated cautiously. An overwhelming majority of Hungarians live in localities where the council is firmly controlled by one multiparty coalition or another, and, as Ilonszki (1999) has shown, there are usually more candidates running for a parliamentary seat in Hungary than in most Western countries.

Sub-cultural institutions - foundations, open universities, farmers' clubs etc. - perform some important functions for the political parties. Networks of professionals, executives and entrepreneurs often contribute free (or not immediately reciprocated) services as think-tanks, transmit the party line as respected public figures or political commentators, and find creative solutions to problems around the party coffers. Sympathetic associations or churches often prove valuable sources of unpaid labour in election campaigns. A strong party presence in the leaderships of civic associations can help obtaining endorsements - in election campaigns and daily political conflicts - from reputable non-partisan sources as well as representation on the public bodies supervising the public broadcast media. According to a 1993 survey of 124 MPs, five in every six parliamentarians were active in some non-partisan organization: 15 percent paid dues in a trade union, 47 percent participated in religious, 63 percent in professional, 24 percent in ethnic, 16 percent in environmental and 26 percent in 'other' associations. At the same time 29 percent recalled having been supported in their campaign by a religious organization, 12 percent by a trade union, 30 percent by a professional, 7 percent by an ethnic, and 10 percent by an environmentalist association (Montgomery 1996).

According to opinion polls, the reputation of parties in general is lower than of other political institutions (see Table X.3). The initial reservation against parties can be explained in terms of the communist legacy, but the various scandals surrounding party politics have certainly strengthened negative stereotypes concerning the actual motives of party politicians. In 1993, government-favoured (but not necessarily incumbent) parties received from the government and immediately sold some remarkably valuable office space; in 1996 government parties apparently demanded a hefty kickback for helping a lawyer to obtain a fabulously lucrative contract with the privatization agency; and the 1998 election campaign of an opposition party may partly have been

financed in the (mistaken) expectation of political favours by a publicly owned commercial bank. All such instances of sleaze turned out to be beyond the reach of legal sanctions, but some of the related scandals are widely believed to have been major causes of drastic electoral losses for the FIDESZ in 1994 and the SZDSZ in 1998, and generated much cynicism about the moral integrity of the MSZP as well as political parties in general.

Yet trust in political parties – as in all other political institutions - started to recuperate after a tremendous drop early in the postcommunist period (see Table X.3). Some short-term ups and downs clearly reflected the electoral cycle, with trust declining mid-term and rising again in the immediate pre- and post-election periods. Apart from this, long-term trends are closely related to the tides of economic expectations, with trust collapsing during the economic crisis of the 1991-92 period and growing reasonably fast whenever average real income grew – especially in 1994, 1997-98 and 2001-2002.

[Tables X.3 and X.4 about here]

It is almost a commonplace that postcommunist Eastern Europe is characterized by negative partisanship and by a dearth of open partisan identification (Rose and Mishler 1997; see also Table X.4). In opinion polls conducted between two elections, around 40 percent of respondents reported no party preference in the 1990s. Voters frequently switched party, and electoral volatility was staggering: 28.3 percent of the vote changed hands between 1990 and 1994, 33.6 percent between 1994 and 1998, and 20.2 percent between 1998 and 2002.⁷

The turn of the new century, however, brought a considerable degree of stabilization and crystallization of partisan support in Hungary, with just a modest volatility of 8.2 percent

occurring between 2002 and 2006. The number of those who had no party preference declined (T. Gázsó 2000). In 1998, the percentage of citizens identifying with a party was still a bit lower than of the average of third-wave democracies where comparative data are available from for the late 1990s – but by 2002 the Hungarian percentage even exceeded the average of established democracies around the millennium (cf. Table X.4). Turnout at the parliamentary elections increased to a previously unprecedented – though still modest - level of 73 percent in the 2002 runoffs, the politicization of the society reached unprecedented heights, and the volatility of party preferences markedly diminished. As the MSZP and the Fidesz emerged as the uncontested representatives of the left and the right, respectively, the emotions of the voters focused on them. Accordingly, the 2002 elections attracted large, previously apolitical segments of the society into active political life.

After losing the first round of the elections, the leader of the Fidesz, Viktor Orbán, turned directly to voters and mobilized them with a powerful anti-Communist rhetoric. The result was impressive and unprecedented. Many hundreds of thousands gathered on the streets of Budapest to listen to the defeated, yet unquestioned leader, who urged the Hungarians to fight the Communist-Cosmopolitan-Capitalist menace. So-called Civic Circles began to mushroom across the country, with the dual task of trying to turn the electoral tide in the second round in favour of the Fidesz-MPP, and to organize bastions of civic resistance to any left-wing government. The Civic Circles recruited tens of thousands of activists within weeks. The informal but uncontested leader of this new movement was Orbán, and while the Civic Circles were not part of Fidesz, their political goals could not have been more partisan (Enyedi 2005).

It would seem, then, that by 2002 even the one obvious weakness of party organizations, the low membership base, was about to disappear. True, the readiness of right-wing voters to join the

Circles, but not the Fidesz, can be read as a clear indication of the unpopularity of parties in Hungary. But two caveats are due at this point. First, the movement closely cooperated with the party and no dissenting voices were heard when Orbán declared that his goal was to channel the movement's energy and personnel into the party. Second, many in the movement were more right-wing than the Fidesz, and still harboured suspicions towards the old guard of this once left-liberal party. They had reasons to hope Orbán would eventually be willing to create a new right-wing party, based at least as much on the Civic Circles as on the Fidesz. In other words, partisan-type ambitions motivated many in the movement, and anti-party sentiments were not relevant.

As many opinion polls have indicated, the voters' political attitudes are often influenced by party cues in less turbulent periods, too. Levels of satisfaction with the political system, but also with economic conditions and the country's future prospects, appear to be directly and moderately strongly linked to party preference. A comparison of 1994 and 1998 data even suggested that voters adopt more pro-market, pro-NATO and pro-EU attitudes when their favourite party is in government, as those currently in office cannot help appearing to the public as the chief advocate of these goals (Hann 1998).

To assess the place of party in the political process, it seems more relevant to compare how parties and other political institutions fare relative to each other than to find an absolute measure of how important individual parties are for the voters in one respect or another. For instance, 'political parties', as we saw above, have commanded less confidence than the media, churches, parliament, government, the president, the constitutional court and local governments ever since 1990. Yet, the more consequential fact may be that the average citizen rates his or her 'favourite party' higher than any of the above institutions (Husz 1998). Similar findings were obtained when

voters were asked about the extent to which various parties and other organizations 'express their views and interests' (Tóka 1996).

This seems to be a critical difference from the kind of situation postulated by the party decline literature. It would seem that in Hungary there are no readily available alternative channels to parties: anti-party movements, corporatist institutions, independent media, NGOs, unconventional or weakly institutionalized political movements do not threaten the political parties' virtual monopoly of political representation.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRENGTH OF HUNGARIAN PARTIES

Despite their modest membership base, the weakness of Hungarian party organizations is anything but obvious. The relevant parties rapidly achieved an elaborate division of labour and hierarchy within the organization (for two case studies see Balázs and Enyedi 1996). They have organizational sub-units dealing with specific issue areas and social sectors (such as standing committees for agriculture, environment protection, etc.), branch offices all over the country, administrators and advisors specializing in fields like PR or party finance, as well as a permanent staff of barristers, financial managers and office workers. While the largest European parties, such as the Austrians, have one staff member working in the central office for every 87,502 voters, and the British parties one for every 660,958 (Webb 1995), the Hungarians have one for every 227,000 (Van Biezen 1998). Salaries in the party central office or in a municipal council may seem low, but there are compensations for demanding supporters. The governing bodies of the numerous public agencies where both opposition and government parties are expected to have representatives, the boards of the enterprises controlled by national or local governments, and the spoils in state and city administration offer many opportunities to reward key supporters.

As purely electoral institutions, the parties do not need many activists, but need some everywhere. They must collect signatures in the constituencies to get access to the ballot, and electoral success critically depends on running candidates in every single-member constituency, at least jointly with another party, because the remainder votes of non-winning candidates can earn mandates at an upper tier. The parliamentary parties nearly always could, if they intended to, put on the ballot a candidate in every single-member district in parliamentary elections. It seems that only in local elections and municipal politics in smaller communities is party influence over the political process hindered by the weakness of local party branches. In the 2002 local elections, only one in five candidates ran as a party-nominated candidate, and nearly two-thirds as independents.

Among the parties relevant for government formation, the MSZP alone resembles the mass party model, mostly by virtue of inheriting a small, but in absolute terms still significant portion of the former communist party personnel, local organizations, financial resources, real estate, network of experts and satellite organizations (Ágh 1995). The other offspring of the former communist party, the orthodox, extra-parliamentary Workers' Party (MP), also developed a strong and lively network of local party organizations. The radical nationalist MIÉP displayed even more the trademarks of a mass party: lively grass-root organization, much direct contact with their voters, well-attended party rallies, a widely circulating party press, a network of civic associations around the party, plus ideological zeal and a comprehensive policy platform. Fidesz started with a thin organization, but during recent years increased its membership, established numerous sections within the party, and built up a very efficient network of activists around the country. The huge variation in the success of these four parties indicates, however, that organization in itself accounts for only a small part of their electoral performance.

Hungarian parties display a relatively high level of systemness (Panebianco 1988): they are uniformly organized and bureaucratically integrated throughout the country, the constituent parts are strongly interdependent, and the sub-units have little autonomy.⁸ Decision-making is centralized and the actual power hierarchies are not far from those prescribed in the party statutes. The internal decision-making processes of the major parties are reasonably institutionalized and the parliamentary groups have practically always been sufficiently disciplined in their voting behaviour (Hanyecz and Perger 1993; Németh 1997), except that scores of deputies defected from their original parliamentary faction in the 1990-98 parliaments.

The defection of individual politicians causes little trouble for parties. At one or another point in time, ex-presidents of the Smallholders, Free Democrats, Christian Democrats and Hungarian Democratic Forum as well as the nationally most popular leaders of the FIDESZ and the Hungarian Socialist Party turned against their party, but the parties survived while the former leaders fell into political oblivion. The only caveat regarding the unimportance of the personal vote in Hungarian elections is that the trend may go in the opposite direction because of the increasing equation of some of the major parties with an individual leader (see below).

Hungarian parties are also autonomous. They are not the political arms of some pre-existing social group or organization. The two most obvious sponsors - the trade unions in the case of the Socialists and the Catholic Church in the case of the Christian Democrats - have suffered humiliating defeats when they tried to alter the party line. In the former case, the trade union allies continued to support the party despite major policy disagreements, while in the latter case the relevant church leaders eventually opted for another partner (Fidesz). Either way, the sponsors failed to keep the parties under control.

The autonomy of the parties is underlined by the fact that party leaders normally emerge from inside the organization. The parties do depend financially on the state, but this dependence does not have any observable impact on their behaviour. The cultural societies, professional associations, pressure groups, and other civic organizations that cultivate partisan ties are not in a position to blackmail the parties. Although some observers (Mair 1997b: 189; Ágh 1995) have described the East European parties as having weak, permeable borders vis-à-vis corporatist structures and social movements, the Fidesz-Civic Circles relationship is the only present-day notable example of such symbiosis, with the clear dominance of the party. The phenomenon of collective membership is completely missing from the party statutes.

It is also worth noting that extra-parliamentary leadership has generally proved stronger than that of the parliamentary faction. Governmental coalitions are invariably decided by the extra-parliamentary party organs, and it is the party leaders who are consulted by the president before nominating someone for the premiership. When critical national security issues arise, as during the 1999 NATO campaign against Yugoslavia or the August 1991 coup in Moscow, the prime minister of the day informally convened the party leaders, and not the leaders of the parliamentary factions in the first place.

The memberships of the parliamentary faction and the party's national board tend to coincide, but the statutes explicitly require the parliamentary factions to report on their activity to the extra-parliamentary party and to follow the guidelines of the latter. The Socialist statute stresses with particular vigour the right of the party's national board to instruct the MPs how to vote, but defiance is likely to provoke expulsion in all parties. The Fidesz statute explicitly gives the right to nominate the faction leader to the party leadership. In the FKGP, the Christian Democrats and the Hungarian Democratic Forum, conflicts between party leader and the majority of the

parliamentary caucus led to splits. But in all such cases, the party leadership prevailed, and the groups that revolted fell into electoral oblivion or joined other parties, regardless of the number of deputies and prominent persons who took their side. Thus, possession of the party label and of the party organization seems to be a decisive asset in Hungarian political struggles.

The predominance of the 'party in central office' is challenged, once again, only by the prime ministerial candidates. As far as they are typically members and even leaders of the party's extra-parliamentary wing, one can speak of an internal challenge. But during the 2002 campaign the two major parties tried to mobilize additional resources by creating a distance between the nominees and the party leadership. In the case of Fidesz Prime Minister Viktor Orbán resigned from all his party positions two years before the elections. This was a merely symbolic gesture, however, since he remained the undisputed leader of the party, keeping his successors under firm control, and after the elections he returned to party presidency.

Yet it is telling that when Orbán resigned from the post of party leader, no Hungarian observer interpreted the move as a sign of his weakened authority. Quite the contrary, the general understanding was that he had become so strong that he could afford not to have any party position at all. Indeed, the previously unprecedented concentration of power in the hand of the prime minister under the Orbán-government led political analysts to speak about the presidentialization of Hungarian government (Körösényi 2000). This trend, logically rooted in the centrality of the premier under the constructive vote of no-confidence rule, seemed to have reached new heights during the 2002 campaign when the Socialist nominee for prime minister, Péter Medgyessy, was not even a member of the party. The MSZP's electoral campaign was jointly coordinated by him and by the party's actual leadership, but Medgyessy had the upper hand. The two years of the subsequent Medgyessy-government were similarly characterized by a

constant struggle between the personal team of the premier and the party organs, and it is yet to be seen whether his resignation in 2004 can be interpreted as the victory of the party, or merely a takeover by another relative outsider and his troops. In any case, the successor, Ferenc Gyurcsány, gained, in the aftermath of the 2006 election, an unprecedented degree of control of both government policies and party leadership chiefly because the party saw him as the leader who single-handedly won that election for the MSZP.

The organizational structures of the parties have a number of uniform features (Lomax 1996). The highest decision-making authority is invariably assigned to the party congress that meets annually or every second year, and is composed of elected representatives of local party branches. The second tier is a national board, usually elected by territorial and – if any exist - functional sub-units (youth organizations, ideological platforms, policy groups, etc.), with some *ex officio* members added. The board meets a couple of times a year. Each significant party has a sort of presidium too, meeting monthly or more frequently. The members are elected by the congress, except that the chairpersons of the faction and the national board usually have *ex officio* voting rights in the presidium.

In the first years after 1988-89, regional party organs were largely limited to co-ordinating and assisting the local organizations. Eventually, however, they obtained significant prerogatives and by the late 1990s have, to a considerable extent, come to represent the national leadership in their dealings with the ‘party on the ground’. This tendency was particularly pronounced in the FKGP, where, unlike most other parties, the members of the regional bodies were not elected by local organizations but consisted entirely of the chairpersons of local branches. The Smallholders were also unique in filling several party offices (including those of the regional secretaries) by appointment.

Centralization seems to have been the trend in every Hungarian party in the 1990s. While this may indicate less the vitality of the parties than the strength of the party leadership vis-à-vis the rank and file, it certainly contributed to most parties becoming more unified by the end of the 1990s than they were at the beginning of the decade. The formal powers of party presidents increased over the years, and their terms became longer (Machos 1998, 1999a). By the late 1990s, the Smallholder statute even stipulated that the president (who, exceptionally among Hungarian parties, was to be elected by open ballot) must not be replaced until 60 days after the following elections. At the other extreme, the Socialists eagerly stress party democracy. Their organizational rules allow for a direct ballot of the members, firmly institutionalize ideologically based factions, and make a bigger effort to diffuse power within the party and prevent politicians holding multiple offices.⁹ Following the resignation of Prime Minister Medgyessy in August 2004, a democratic intra-party process was employed to select his successor from among multiple contenders, and, indeed, the nominee of the party leadership lost the vote.

Organizational structures and rules became standardized within parties. Special privileges, such as those given in the KDNP to the pre-1948 deputies of their predecessor, the Democratic People's Party, were reduced or abolished. Local organizations were required to adopt a uniform structure, e.g. having a single chairperson (Machos 1999a). Discipline in the local branches was at the same time greatly tightened. In Fidesz, for example, local organizations were disbanded for not supporting the MDF-candidate in constituencies where the national party leaderships agreed to run joint MDF-Fidesz candidates in 1998. Such measures would have been inconceivable and widely criticized at the time of the 1990 election, which certainly limited the parties' capacity to negotiate electoral coalitions.

The right-wing parties reached a particularly high level of centralization, partly in response to intense factional fights within their ranks. The strong prerogatives of their presidents were well illustrated by the case of the FKGP and, for some time, MDF, where the presidents alone became responsible for proposing a national list of candidates for parliamentary elections. The MSZP is the only party where the local branches seem to have retained their earlier level of autonomy, especially in the selection of constituency candidates, while unconditional loyalty to the party leader became a fundamental norm in Fidesz, the FKGP and the MIÉP. Organized internal factions emerged, at one time or another, in every significant party. But it is only in the Socialist Party where the coexistence of factions led to an enduring equilibrium. In the other parties the vigorous activity of party 'platforms' signalled a crisis that ended with the ultimate victory of one over the others.

The way candidates are nominated depends on the type of elections and the party. Besides, in elections to parliament rather different rules apply for single-member districts, regional and national party lists. Usually, a meeting of local organizations nominates candidates for election to local councils, while the regional lists for parliamentary elections are drawn up by regional boards and ratified by the national board.¹⁰ The national board has the final word on the national list, although in most parties the presidium makes the actual decisions. As an exception, the head of the party is expected to play a central role in drawing up the MSZP list that is formally accepted by the congress on the proposal of the national board.

There is a large variation among parties in the way they select candidates for single member districts, and these practices seem to have less to do with the probability of the party winning such seats than with the overall distribution of power in the organization. In the Socialist Party and the KDNP, for instance, the task is left to constituency organizations, although higher level

party bodies were at the same time able to obtain veto rights. Typically national level organizations have to approve every candidate, although the initiative usually belongs to lower echelons of the party (see also Ilonszki 1999 and Machos 1999a).

While parties are undoubtedly more professional organizations today than a decade ago, the self-reported data indicate some decline in organizational resources. The average parliamentary party had around 80 staff members in 1995, but only 60 in 2003. During this period the number of local organizations has declined from around one thousand to five hundred (calculated from Kurtán *et al.*, 1988). Efficiency seems to have required a sharper organizational focus, and more extensive reliance on collateral organizations and PR-companies. The MSZP streamlined its apparatus partly under government pressure: it was finally compelled to give up its office buildings rented from the state in the communist era. Detailed information is not available about the distribution of the staff members, but van Biezen's data (1998) suggests the superiority of the extra-parliamentary wing: in 1997 about 38 percent of the party staff worked in the central offices of the parties, and only 25 percent for the parliamentary factions.

Most of the declared income of Hungarian parties comes from annual transfers paid by the government budget. The party law - subject to a super-majority requirement - makes the allocation a non-linear function of election results, and parliament decides the annual increment of the entire allocation during the budget debate. Between 1990 and 2003 the subsidies to parties went up from half a billion forints (in 1990, approximately \$8 million) to two and a half billion (approximately \$10 million). Though this change may seem insignificant, given the considerable budget cuts in other areas they indicate the relatively privileged position of political parties in the national budget.

Meanwhile party expenditures have increased dramatically. The parties responded partly by organizing networks of sponsors. According to the party law, donations have no upper limit and can come from anyone except foreign governments and state enterprises. In practice, benefactors are keen to preserve their anonymity. In 2002, for example, the MSZP received 200 million forints, but only 6.3 million came from an identified source. According to their official records, duly published in the official gazette every year and routinely – though without much visible effect - ridiculed by the State Audit Office, donations are a less significant source of revenue than public funding, but far more important than membership fees.

The amount of money available from all these sources often falls significantly short of the parties' expenditure. So far, the gaps were filled partly by the post-electoral patience of domestic commercial banks, which lent money for election campaigns even against the odds, and partly from the sale of headquarters buildings that the parties received for free from the state, as well as other forms of indirect reliance on public money. For instance, the fringe benefits of deputies – such as refunds for travel, and accommodation - have increased drastically over the years, and the parties have begun to tax their parliamentarians. Even more importantly, starting with the 2004 fiscal year another 2.2 billion forints of state subsidies were allocated to the newly established party foundations. With this new source the overall amount of money that parties receive from the Hungarian state rose well above 20 million dollars.

At the end of the day, political parties just do not go bankrupt. No matter how desperately indebted some Hungarian parties became at some points, as long as they remained in the parliament they found the means to run their organization and were apparently not constrained in increasing their electoral appeal by lack of funding. The occasional scandals about party finances had little lasting impact on the electoral performance of the parties in question. While they can be

cited as evidence of the parties' incapacity to raise the necessary revenues in legal ways, it is equally justified to see them as proof of an amazing ability to fill party coffers whenever and whatever is needed.

THE SYSTEMATIC FUNCTIONALITY OF HUNGARIAN PARTIES

Evaluations of the role of political parties in policy formation depend entirely on the frame of reference (Schonfeld 1983). The methods that have been employed for quantitative cross-national comparisons between Western democracies (e.g. Alesina, Roubini and Cohen 1997; Klingemann, Hofferbert and Budge 1994) all require a much longer time horizon than is available in the Hungarian context. Thus, instead of assessing the relationship between policy outcomes and party ideologies or election pledges, below we contemplate whether there are visible obstacles to party influence on public policies in Hungary.

Governance

The strongest brakes on party rule are probably the Constitutional Court and the Hungarian National Bank. Both have clearly defined priorities, procedures and professional norms to honour in their decisions, and are not accountable to the parliament. To further reduce the importance of partisan considerations, the terms of the judges of the Constitutional Court (elected for nine years) and the chairman of the National Bank (elected for six years) bridge over the lifetime of several parliaments.

At the same time, the judges of the court and the chief central banker are all elected by parliament. The nomination process is such that the candidates for the Constitutional Court and the candidate for the chairmanship of the central bank need to show some partisan colour. The

political tensions between the chairman of the central bank and two different governments ended in the early replacement of the chairman in 1992 and 1994. The 2002-2006 Socialist-Liberal government, however, got locked into a desperate and surprisingly open war with the bank. But this battle was also interpreted as a partisan one, since the bank chairman in question was a minister of the previous government, who can in no way hope to be re-elected for another term after the Socialist victory in the 2006 election.

Thus, a degree of party influence is presumably present in both the court and the bank, even if this is never admitted. In practice, the court proved the more formidable check on governmental power. It annulled hundreds of politically salient government decrees and legislation, including a 1991 restitution law that might have been instrumental in keeping the then governmental coalition together, and nearly all social policy initiatives of the 1995 economic austerity programme. The court also prevented a few referendums from taking place. Yet, the unusual assertiveness of the Constitutional Court does not reduce the government's accountability for intended or failed legislation. Thus the check provided by the Court is not all that different from simple reality constraints on party government.

Other constraints that may be stronger in Hungary than usual include the high trade-openness of the economy, high – for most of the 1990s one of the world's highest – per capita foreign debt, and the sensitivity of the balance of payment to the profit expectations of a small club of foreign-owned corporations that produce roughly four-fifths of the country's total exports. Many observers have attributed a prominent role to similar constraints in making Hungarian governments of different political colours pursue relatively similar economic policies (cf. Greskovits 1998).

However, the scope of party government is vastly greater than usual because the postcommunist transition created an expectation that any fundamental law could be swiftly changed by parliament, without much consultation with the interested parties. The range of feasible economic policy options may be restricted by the country's vulnerability to capital flight, but it was by the firm commitment of the major parties that Hungary went through a rapid and thorough privatization and economic liberalization in the 1990s, and attracted as much hot money and foreign direct investment as it did. Similarly, the powers of the Constitutional Court were granted and can be taken away by legislation. The relationship between 'objective' constraints and party government is, therefore, less obvious than it first appears.

On economic issues Hungarian parties are normally characterized by a broad consensus on principles, near-agreement on details, or simply a lack of alternative visions (in Kitschelt et al. 1999). In the frequent absence of clear party initiatives, individual bureaucrats – or small, non-partisan groups of specialists, as happened when each parliamentary party delegated a pharmacist-turned-deputy to the committee that effectively determined the legal framework for the privatization of pharmacies in the early 1990s - may, on occasion, have a considerable influence in policy-making, but only as long as politicians do not mind and are ready to take responsibility. The public bureaucracy as a whole is certainly not a politically cohesive actor that would systematically follow a specific priority (like the court or the central bank are supposed to), and its professional ethos clearly recognizes that politicians are to define public policy. Besides, it is theory rather than reality that the civil service law regulates employment, remuneration and career in such detail that very little room is left for direct political influence on the functioning of public bureaucracies – in fact, such influence seems to be widespread although still not ever-present.

This is not to say that government bureaucracies can only suffer frustration in pursuing a specific policy objective against the apparent will of politicians. It is widely believed that during the 1990s the army's successive chiefs of command practically monopolized decision-making on a wide array of issues that they considered matters of exclusively professional judgement, while the civilian leadership of the Defence Ministry thought otherwise. Yet, this seems to have been an exception limited to some relatively technical issue domains where the information asymmetry between politicians and professionals was particularly acute, and the unity, determination and cohesion of the relevant bureaucracy was not undermined – but possibly enhanced, as in the above example involving pharmacists - by the opening of lucrative opportunities in the private sector.

More noteworthy - if less powerful – constraints were imposed on party government where specific policy objectives or interests were given privileged representation at the expense of the legislature and the national government. The independence (from any political influence) of the public broadcast media, the civil service, the Prosecutor General, and so forth became central and commonly accepted articles of faith in political discourse for a few years after 1989. The ensuing trend towards the dispersion of political influence involved the institutionalization of tripartite talks about wages and some aspects of the budget between government, business and trade unions. According to legislation passed in 1991, self-governing corporate bodies, to be directly elected by the citizens from among trade union representatives, were to manage public health and pension funds. The first (and only) election to these bodies took place in 1993 and – unexpectedly – attracted almost as many voters as a parliamentary election.

As part of the same trend, 1990 saw the counties abolished as units of administration, and local councils granted not just wide autonomy but also half the income tax revenue collected from

their residents by the central government. In a further blow to party government, in 1994 the direct election of mayors (and thus, the practice of divided government) was extended from villages to the urban municipalities, introducing a considerable incumbency advantage and personal vote in these previously straight partisan races.¹¹ Finally, however, the trend towards centralization proved to be more decisive, culminating in the abolition of the tripartite Interest Reconciliation Council and the autonomous public health and pension funds in 1998-99. While the jurisdiction of local governments remained substantial, their fiscal strength and autonomy vis-à-vis the central government dramatically decreased compared to 1990. Several major parties proposed to bring the prosecutors under direct government control, and the civilian control of the army appreciably increased.

Meanwhile, the unicameral, fraction-centred structure of the legislature remained supportive of party government. While some parties are, in principle, committed to establishing a corporative second chamber, the proposal has slim prospects of ever being accepted by the necessary two-thirds majority in the parliament. Although a proposal passed in 1990 stipulates that seats must be reserved in the Parliament for special representatives of ethnic minorities, the absence of agreed-upon procedure have so far prevented the election of such (non-party) deputies. The rules of the game meanwhile protect the 'established' parties from possible challengers. After 1990, 75 percent of public party funding was distributed proportionally among the parties with over 1 percent of the vote in the last election, and 25 percent equally among the parties represented in the parliament (Juhász 1996). In 1994, the parties that are represented in the parliament but have no fraction of their own lost their share in the 25 percent. Together with the raising of the threshold of parliamentary representation from 4 to 5 percent of the vote, these modifications were intended to protect the parties against splits and newcomers, and to reduce the blackmail

potential of the parties' internal opposition. Since 1994 only parties can have parliamentary fractions (previously independents also had this right); a minimum of 15 deputies are needed to register a new one which did not run in the previous election, and deputies who defect from their fraction (or are expelled from it) must wait six months before they can join another. Those deputies who do not belong to a fraction cannot participate in the work of the committees, which play an even more important role in the Hungarian than the average West European legislature (see Renwick 1998).

Paradoxically, the most serious challenge to the governing function of the parties may come from inside the parties themselves. Once a party leader becomes prime minister, his executive power is almost unlimited by the party. Since cabinet members can only be dismissed on the proposal of the premier, and not even the repeated loss of parliamentary votes makes them step down, it is the head of the government who solely bears accountability for their actions. Because of the constructive vote of no confidence, the premier can only be brought down after the parliament reaches a comprehensive agreement about the replacement, and – given the predominance of the premier after investiture - presumably also on the new portfolio allocation and government policies. No wonder that the first vote of confidence has yet to be tabled in the Hungarian parliament. What may seem more surprising is that even this way there was a prime minister who resigned at midterm – but even that move seemed much more like a miscalculated attempt to impose his will on the junior coalition partner, the SZDSZ, than the admission of diminished confidence in his leadership on the government benches of parliament.

Having this unusually powerful position, the Hungarian prime minister may well develop different priorities than his party. No matter whether a policy initiative originated in the bureaucracy or in direct negotiations between interest groups and government, the backing of the

senior party representative in the government makes it hard for party loyalists to argue that it does not represent the party line. This tendency was particularly apparent between 1998 and 2002 in the Fidesz, which looked upon its leader as its major political asset. The fall of prime minister Medgyessy in 2004 was, however, widely interpreted as a sign of the predominance of parties over the prime ministers. Thus, it seems that the significant role played by Hungarian prime ministers creates only modest variation within the generic class called party government.

Interest articulation and aggregation

While the decreasing fragmentation reduces, the high level of emotional polarization enhances the capacity of the Hungarian party system for interest articulation. The rival sides offer fairly clear choices on issues related to alternative visions of nationhood or the role of religion in social life (cf. Kitschelt et al. 1999), and justify their positions in highly ideological language, routinely declaring their opponents anti-democratic and/or enemies of the nation. But clear (not to speak about pre-electoral) policy commitments are limited to relatively few issues, leaving much to be decided at the point where party and government policies cannot be distinguished. Financial crisis situations further constrain the capacity of parties to channel demands into government policies. To cite only the most spectacular example, no party body heard about the 1995 austerity programme (arguably the single most important government initiative in the 1990s) before its announcement.

Individual citizens, single-issue movements, interest groups, local councils and the media probably account for a bigger share of interest articulation than parties. Yet, the national political agenda - as reflected by newspaper headlines - is determined mainly by what the parties and the government talk about (see Török 2003). Single-issue groups try to gain the support of as many

parties as possible and, rather than developing an anti-party discourse, are ready to offer endorsements in elections. There are no serious reform initiatives to reduce the role of the parties, and little evidence that an anti-party appeal would work in the electoral arena. The anti-establishment forces of the far left and the far right, up to the present, seem perfectly happy to work through party-like organizations. Social movements and interest groups do have the ability to initiate referendums. But in practice they have so far been unable to overcome all the obstacles involved. The relevance of the party-dominated parliament vis-à-vis social movements was further increased in 1997 by an amendment that raised the number of signatures required for calling a referendum to 200,000. Only the 2004 referendum on the extension of citizenship-rights to those citizens of neighbouring countries who are of Hungarian origin seemed to be an exception from this rule. But this referendum failed to pass a second hurdle in that it remained legally non-binding due to the low turnout.

Overall, it remains arguable from many perspectives as to whether Hungarian parties give effective representation to the policy preferences of ordinary citizens. But they do provide highly identifiable governmental alternatives and retrospective accountability. During the first decade of democratic development this proved enough to channel policy initiatives and dissatisfaction regarding virtually any aspect of the status quo to support - for some time, at least - one or another component of the existing party system, preventing political outsiders from making a major impact. At the same time the highly elitist and centralized structure of Hungarian parties contributes to the gap that exists between the agenda of the political elite and the primary concerns of the voters. In opinion polls citizens regularly rank issues related to religion, communism and nationhood as marginally important, while the parties continue to base their political identities on the very same issues. This expressive orientation of Hungarian parties

strengthens in the public the stereotype that parties – while emotionally relevant - are far removed from the ‘real life of ordinary citizens’. Recent years, however, saw a marked increase in the centrality of very practical, bread and butter issues in election campaigns as well as the policy debates between the parties.

Political participation

The role of parties in structuring political participation is, as indicated by the low membership figures, small in absolute terms. But in relative terms parties are important in this regard as well. Since 1993 probably all political events – save public ceremonies - that attracted more than ten thousand people were, in one way or another, sponsored by political parties. Ekiert and Kubik (1998: 559) finds a contrast with West European experiences in the ‘much smaller role of social movements in sponsoring protest activities and the relatively larger role of traditional organizations such as political parties, trade unions, or professional associations’ in East Central Europe. The parties sometimes welcomed civic organizations appearing as the chief organizer, and trade unions or farmers’ associations provided transportation for many participants. But without the parties’ endorsement, few of these events would have taken place and attracted a remotely comparable crowd. The exceptions were nearly all trade union-led demonstrations called to support narrowly economic demands. But trade unions are negligible when it comes to broader political issues. This is apparent from the fact that the 1991 trade union law (supported by some, but bitterly opposed by other unions), the 1995 austerity measures, and the dismantling of the Interest Reconciliation Council in 1999 were all carried out without the unions offering any serious protest.

Party members, however, rarely get together. The obligation to pay membership dues is taken more and more seriously, but its significance within the (official) party budgets is low, hardly ever accounting for more than 3 percent of all revenues. Save the short periods of leadership-contests, party members are often more active and more vocal in collateral organizations than in the party itself. Party leaders naturally encourage the members to join interest groups, parents' associations, vocational societies, and support the party policies in the name of these 'independent' social organizations.

The general inability of parties to anchor themselves firmly in the society went along with a low level of electoral participation. In the first round of the four parliamentary elections since 1990, some 65, 69, 56, 70.5, and 68 percent of the citizens, respectively, voted. Local elections attracted even less voters, around 40 percent nationally. Yet turnout in the second round of parliamentary elections has been increasing from 45 percent in 1990 to 55, 57, 73.5 and 64 percent in 1994, 1998, 2002, and 2006 as citizens started to grasp the role of the runoff in government formation and the party system turned increasingly bipolar. Since the 2002 campaign, the parties also proved to be able to mobilize many citizens as active participants of mass rallies – with the single best attended 2002 rally attracting, according to the conflicting estimates, anywhere between 5 and 15 percent of the adult population - and as the representatives of partisan ideologies in local communities. Especially the 2002 election proved that political apathy is far from inevitable and that the high stakes and the opposition of clear-cut governing alternatives may help parties in reaching wider social circles.

The two largest parties' (MSZP and Fidesz) statutes provide for a measure of direct democracy (their members can be balloted on non-financial issues), and other parties also provide for the use of similar techniques. The trend is, however, towards party congresses becoming ever more a

formality – not much more than carefully staged PR events -, and towards disregarding the interests of local party organizations whenever they conflict with the electoral interests of the party leadership. Within the MDF, the SZDSZ and the MSZP, there often are dissenting voices, but ordinary members have little to do with the debates between the party leadership and the dissenters. The only noteworthy politicization and mobilization of the ‘party on the ground’ took place within the Socialist Party in 2004. Following the resignation of the premier, the party leadership intended to nominate a long-serving party figure as the new PM. The local party organizations demanded an open contest, however, and the delegates voted by a large majority for a rival candidate at the party congress called on their demand. The conflict was partly about different criteria, but the rank and file proved even more partisan than the leadership: the latter was looking for a politician who could take over the work in the cabinet without delay, while the activists were searching for the candidate with the best chance to win the next national election. Nevertheless, the rejection of the official nominee took the form of a grass-root rebellion and the leadership suffered a humiliating defeat.

Political recruitment

Parties have no serious challengers in the selection of political personnel in Hungary. While some politicians were helped in their party careers by political capital that they acquired as journalists, environmentalists, trade union officials or business leaders, their access to governmental and legislative positions remains a function of partisan considerations – although certainly not of formal party membership. Several ministers came from the wider circle of experts surrounding the parties and not the parties themselves, though ministers must still meet the expectations of the

party. When tensions arise, the parliamentary fraction invites the minister for a direct meeting, and all ministers care to be seen as deferential at these informal discussions.

Following a change of government (or even an individual minister), many more employees than just the formally recognized circle of political appointees are eventually replaced in the ministries and government agencies. This fate has affected, for instance, the so-called administrative secretary of state (the highest-ranking career bureaucrat) in half the ministries shortly after each parliamentary election that produced alternation in power. As far as any trend is detectable, 'political parachutists' increasingly appear in ostensibly non-political positions in the ministries and public agencies, especially since the 1998 election, despite the expectation that continuity in the ministries would eventually rise as the years of regime change come to an end.¹²

In a seeming contrast to this trend, after the 1998 election Fidesz placed far more non-party figures in high political office than its 1994-98 predecessor, and the same held for the 2002-2004 Medgyessy government too. Yet these appointees were, for the most part, either opinion leaders of the political and professional groupings that allied with the main government party, or long-serving advisers to the party leadership. Clearly, the allegiance of these people to the government - and to the premier in particular - was only made stronger by their lack of a partisan power base. However, some other factors probably counterbalanced, at least until 2002, this reduction in the scope of party influence. In 1998-2002, in the ministries headed by seemingly non-partisan notabilities, Fidesz militants obtained junior positions and - according to some observers - effectively ran the apparatus. Similarly, the Orbán-government introduced an administrative reform that greatly expanded - at the expense of the ministries - the role of the 'chancellery', i.e. the Prime Minister's Office, headed by a separate minister elevated in rank above all other cabinet ministers. As long as Orbán remained premier, this assured that the party leader had close

control over all policy areas. While the Medgyessy-government softened the links between party and government, its successor, under Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, promised a return to a situation in which ‘the parties will have a government and not vice versa’. The immediate post-electoral situation in 2006 did indeed confirm this, but in a somewhat ironical way. Probably more key figures from the leadership of the major government party received a cabinet position than any time before, but all substantive decision rights were formally transferred from the ministries to the Prime Minister’s Office. Besides, it was agreed that the premier himself should soon become the formal leader of the party. The overlap between party leadership and government thus became fuller than ever, but the party itself became more than ever equated with its supposedly main electoral asset, the prime minister.

Independent candidates stand virtually no chance in parliamentary elections: in 1990, six of them were still elected, but just one in the next four elections together. The number of independent candidates sharply decreased from 198 in 1990 to 103, 53, 40, and 12 in 1994, 1998, 2002, and 2006, respectively. Not all candidates are party members - one-fourth of the Smallholders candidates in 1998, for example, were not - but the number of non-members or interest group representatives is small among the elected deputies, and they are expected to follow the party leadership on crucial issues.

The most spectacular example of deference to party was provided by the trade union officials elected on the Socialist lists in 1994 who, as deputies, loyally supported the 1995 austerity programme despite the unions’ opposition to it. The non-socialist parties were less consistently successful in this respect. The Roma leaders elected to parliament on SZDSZ lists in 1990 eventually came to disagree with the party line on Roma issues, and the former chairman of the

Chamber of Medical Doctors showed, as Fidesz deputy and Minister of Health Care, arguably more loyalty to guild than party on issues of health care reform.

Though generally disciplined in legislative voting, the partisanship of the elected deputies remained somewhat volatile until the third democratic election. Until 1998 on average one in seven deputies changed party affiliation, and by the end of the legislative term the number of independent deputies increased considerably. Since 1998, however, splits of parliamentary fractions and the defections of isolated individuals became a rare phenomenon.

Few deputies managed to build up a personal power base in the constituencies. Given the high electoral volatility, party control of nomination and recruitment facilitates a high turnover of backbenchers and government personnel. After the 1990 founding election, for instance, 95 percent of deputies were new (with just 20 members of the outgoing parliament re-elected), but even in the 1994 and 1998 elections, only 36 and 47 percent of the incumbents, respectively, held on to their seats. Only a handful of the 1998-2002 deputies – 6 percent in the Fidesz, 19 in the MSZP, 13 in the SZDSZ, and none in the MDF caucus - failed to run in the 2002 election, and only 31.6 percent of the new parliament had never been a deputy before (Kurtán and Király 2003).

Local politics in small settlements is distinctly non-partisan. The official count of local elections - showing, for instance, that over 80 percent of all elected mayors run as independents - always prompts some speculation in the media about the unpopularity of party politics and voters' massive shift to non-partisan candidates. Yet the phenomenon can be much better explained by the lack of party branches in the smallest of the approximately 3200 municipalities. In localities with more than 10000 inhabitants 'independent' mayors are rare and get elected only as

candidates of multiparty coalitions. In these municipalities over 90 percent of all councillors are elected as party nominees.

Positions on the boards of state-owned companies like the national airline or the gambling monopoly are frequently treated as party spoils. The trends over time are somewhat ambiguous. The drastic reduction in the number of state-owned companies by the astonishingly fast privatization process of the 1990s may have reduced the number of spoils within easy reach, but probably not the number of spoils that were actually grabbed. While in 1990 the new parties simply lacked the vast number of cadres who could have been seated on company boards, after the 1998 election an increasingly assertive use of governmental prerogatives appeared in placing party soldiers in ostensibly non-partisan posts at the top of government agencies and even some football clubs.

Political communication and education

The tremendous economic and political changes after 1989 forced East European citizens to learn the fundamentals of their new regimes in a very short time. Parties and their politicians were in the forefront of the distribution of the necessary information, and they were also active in socializing the citizens into pro-democratic and pro-capitalistic beliefs. The knowledge of the rules of representative democracy, of a market economy and of the European Union filtered down to citizens largely *via* the interpretation of the political parties. The channel of this education was, however, not the party organization or the satellite institutions of parties, but the mass media.

Party control of political communications is Janus-faced. The electronic media are obliged to provide balanced coverage and are barred from political commentary by the 1996 media law. In terms of sheer survival and firmness of party control, there have been just two successful (low

circulation) party papers: the weekly magazine of the marginal and small MIÉP, and the periodical of the even more marginal Workers' Party.

Yet all broadsheet papers and many printed and electronic news magazines have a clear political leaning that determines issue coverage, framing, and tone to an extent that is unusual among the Western highbrow media (see Lange 1994). As a new development, private radio and TV channels have been founded recently, with clear but informal partisan sympathies in the case of left-liberal organs (ATV and Klub Radio) and with more open organizational and/or financial ties to parties in the case of some right-wing outlets (Pannon Radió, Hír TV, Inforádió).

In the political programmes of public television the leading personnel go through major reshuffles after every change of government, and content oscillates between government-leaning and government-propagating periods (Popescu and Tóka 2002). Although the 1996 media law provided for parity between government and opposition representatives on the parliament-elected bodies overseeing the public electronic media, the letter of the law proved insufficient to alter this situation even while it was observed – and then, there were periods when it was simply ignored.

All in all, major sections of the media function, for most of the time, as genuine party mouthpieces. This is particularly true for all right-wing organs, which are desperately dependent on politically-motivated contributions. Yet, political communication is the only area reviewed here where signs of party decline are noticeable over time. This trend is due to the launch of private television channels, which became possible in 1997. The foreign-owned commercial channels launched in 1997 provide fairly balanced political coverage, and even have the capacity and courage to explore issues that can occupy centre stage on the political agenda.

CONCLUSIONS

In terms of programmatic crystallization (Kitschelt et al. 1999) and electoral volatility (Tóka 1998), the Hungarian party system seems to have been an intermediate, rather than extreme case in the postcommunist world. The radical decline in party system fragmentation, however, sets the country somewhat apart from its neighbours. While in 1990 the two largest parties commanded just 46 percent of all list votes, the same figure was over 85 percent in 2006. The effective number of legislative parties changed from an already moderate 3.7 in May 1990 to 2.9 in 1994, to 3.4 in 1998, 2.2 in 2002 and to 2.6 in 2006.¹³ As discussed above, this shift of the Hungarian parliament towards a two-party system has been underpinned by a polarized political space and by the majoritarian elements of the institutional framework. The political, cultural, media and religious elite have always had a largely bipolar structure. Parties close to the five percent threshold have been repeatedly condemned by members of the elite for risking the defeat of 'their side' (Enyedi 2006). The fragmented public has finally yielded to the elite pattern, with only two minor parties retaining relevance to date.

The organizational and ideological position of the parties, the relations among them and their links to the society have changed as well, but the party system as such still appears to be one of the most stable social sub-systems. The 2006 elections will presumably confirm this by showing even aggregate volatility falling well under the 10 percent mark compared to the previous national election. We believe that this stability presents a major puzzle.

The international and domestic political and economic contexts of East European societies have undergone greater change since the early 1990s than the more stable parts of the world have known in decades. The various phases of the postcommunist transformation have given rise to entirely different political and economic issues and conflicts. Consequently, the parties had to pass many tests of flexibility and adaptability. First, they were agents of the political transition,

defining themselves in terms of continuity-discontinuity with the late communist system. Within a few months they built up a national organization, developed an ideological profile sufficiently intelligible in Western terms so as to allow them entry into European party families, and got involved in the management of public administrations at both local and national levels. They also changed their organizational structures and leadership styles as building an identity, increasing electoral strength or establishing credibility as coalition members took their turns at the top of the party agenda (cf. Harmel and Svaasand 1993). The main protagonists of the 1988-90 transition have experienced the radically different conditions of being in anti-system opposition, serving in government, and relegation by a democratic election into pro-system opposition.

Their impressive resilience aside, the lack of deep roots in society – or, at least, the fact that they constantly invite this characterization – is, or used to be, the most obvious feature of Hungarian parties. In some ways, this has been as much an asset as a liability. A high partisan penetration of society (a large membership, strong party attachments, etc.) may have been a mixed blessing from the point of view of regime consolidation (Pride 1970), and less flexible party positions on socio-economic issues might have hampered the parties' adaptation to a rapidly transforming society. True, the relative obscurity of between-party differences on major socio-economic issues may have undermined the parties' performance in their policy representational role. But this would only be relevant if we were to examine the health of the democratic system as a whole, and not simply the strength of the parties.

We are inclined to judge the vitality of parties rather by the degree to which they reign supreme in their institutional environment. In this respect, Hungarian parties seem to fare reasonably well, notwithstanding their questionable popularity with the voters. The striking decisiveness of elections has provided for a strong dose of party government. It is not only that

the party and electoral system reliably generate highly competitive elections, with rather clearly defined governmental alternatives and links between election results and government composition. The decisive role of elections is further increased by the remarkable stability of governments, strong party discipline in the legislature, the dearth of formal limits on the power of the parliament, the scale of politically sanctioned social changes, and the autonomous nature of the parties. No elected office-holder on the national level seems to doubt that politicians gain, keep and lose office according to the bargaining power of the parties behind them.

Among citizens, attitudinal support for party government is probably not very high, but, in the absence of attractive and credible alternatives, this generates neither calls for reform nor specifically anti-party sentiment. Political representation is nearly monopolized by parties, and recent years have witnessed an increase in stable, strongly held partisan attachments (see Table X.4). A high degree of polarization may have a number of unwelcome consequences – in public parlance it is common pejoratively to refer to a ‘cold civil war’ between left and right - but it helps the development of crystallized political identities and generates support for individual parties.

Party government seems to be challenged more by forces from within than by interest groups, social movements or citizens’ initiatives. Ministers, backbenchers, party delegates on various public bodies, even party-leaders-turned-premiers may have a stronger commitment to a wider political camp or a particular set of goals and norms than to their parties. As we pointed out, the relationship between prime ministers and the party that delegated them has become somewhat loose, and in the early years of the new century, the country was probably moving towards less party government as a result. To some extent this is inevitable and even increases the legitimacy

of party government, but at the same it undermines both the power of party and the accountability of office-holders through elections.

Viewed from a broader perspective, political parties in postcommunist democracies face similar challengers as their Western counterparts, from single-issue groups and highly competitive capital markets to increasingly supranational media and public administration. But they do not have to confront a comparably lively civil society and cannot rely on the institutions, inertia, and partisan loyalties of a long-established party system. Yet every hiatus also means an opportunity: while East European parties may have even more difficulty in shaping and directing mass attitudes and behaviour than those of the older democracies, they may be better able to control the power structures surrounding them.¹⁴ Placed in an excellent position to shape the momentous social and political transformation of their countries, they may well be able to impose a genuinely partisan order on society.

Table X.1: Percentage distribution of list votes in Hungarian parliamentary elections, 1990-2006

	1990	1994	1998	2002	2006
MSZP	10.89	32.99	32.89	42.05	43.31
SZDSZ	21.39	19.74	7.57	5.57	6.50
MDF	24.73	11.74	2.80	41.07*	5.04
Fidesz	8.95	7.02	29.45		42.03*
KDNP	6.46	7.03	2.31	-	
FKgP	11.73	8.82	13.14	0.75	0.02
MIÉP	-	1.59	5.47	4.37	2.20**
Others	15.85	11.07	6.37	6.19	0.99
ENEP	6.40	5.21	4.41	2.82	2.69

*joint list **: MIÉP-Jobbik joint list.

Source: Reports of the National Election Committee.

Table X.2: Distribution of seats in Hungarian parliamentary elections, 1990–2006

	1990	1994	1998	2002	2006
MSZP	33 (8.5%)	209 (54.1%)	134 (34.7%)	178 (46.1%)	190 (49.2%)
SZDSZ	94 (24.4%)	70 (18.1%)	24 (6.2%)	20 (5.2%)	20 (5.2%)
FIDESZ	22 (5.7%)	20 (5.2%)	148 (38.3%)	164 (42.5%)	141 (36.5%)
FKGP	44 (11.4%)	26 (6.7%)	48 (12.4%)	- (0.0%)	- (0.0%)
KDNP	21 (5.4%)	22 (5.7%)	- (0.0%)	- (0.0%)	23 (6.0%)
MDF	164 (42.5%)	38 (9.8%)	17 (4.4%)	24 (6.2%)	11 (2.8%)
MIÉP	- (0.0%)	- (0.0%)	14 (3.6%)	- (0.0%)	- (0.0%)
independents	6 (1.6%)	- (0.0%)	1 (0.3%)	- (0.0%)	- (0.0%)
others	2 (0.5%)	1 (0.3%)	- (0.0%)	- (0.0%)	1 (0.3%)

Note: The majorities of the incoming governments are printed in bold. Deputies elected in single-member districts as joint candidates of more than one party are counted according to the parliamentary party they joined at the first session of the respective parliament, including two ASZ candidates (one each in 1990 and 1994, respectively) who joined SZDSZ in exchange for receiving SZDSZ endorsement in the second round of the election.

Sources: as above, and press reports about the first session of each parliament.

Table X.3: Percentage of citizens who have ‘great’ or ‘some’ trust in various political institutions, 1991-2005

	Constitutional Court	President	Government	Political Parties	Parliament
1991	67	79	56	36	56
1992	48	56	32	26	32
1993	57	64	33	28	33
1994	64	76	55	39	51
1995	62	70	37	32	39
1996	63	69	37	30	36
1997	65	68	39	32	38
1998	69	73	53	40	50
1999	69	75	46	37	46
2000	67	74	43	35	44
2001	67	67	45	37	45
2002	68	66	54	42	52
2003	65	63	48	37	47
2004	65	65	42	36	44
2005	66	68	42	35	43

Source: polls carried out by the Medián Public Opinion and Market Research Institute and kindly provided to us by Endre Hann and Gergely Karácsony.

Table X.4: Incidence of partisan identification in Hungary in cross-national comparison

<i>Old democracies</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>third wave democracies</i>	<i>%</i>
Australia 1996	84	Bulgaria 2001	43
Canada 1997	52	Chile 1999	21
Denmark 1998	51	Czech Republic 1996	49
France 2002	57	<i>Hungary 1998</i>	34
Germany 1998	42	<i>Hungary 2002</i>	52
Germany 2002	35	Lithuania 1997	31
Ireland 2002	28	Mexico 2000	53
Israel 1996	64	Poland 1997	53
Japan 1996	39	Poland 2001	42
The Netherlands 1998	26	Portugal 2002	52
New Zealand 1996	53	Romania 1996	47
New Zealand 2002	53	Spain 1996	44
Norway 1997	53	Slovenia 1996	22
Sweden 1998	53	South Korea 2000	27
Switzerland 1999	37	Spain 2000	42
USA 1996	54	Thailand 2001	22
United Kingdom 1997	49	Taiwan 1996	34
Average:	49	Average:	39

Note: Table entries show the percentage of respondents who responded with yes (instead of no) to the following question: ‘Do you usually think of yourself as close to any particular political party?’ All data are based on interviews with national probability samples interviewed shortly after a national election. Source: CSES (2003a, 2003b), weighted with demographic weights when available. Non-democratic countries covered by the data - Belarus (2000), Hong Kong (1997, 2000), Mexico (1997), Peru (2000-2001), Russia (1999, 2000), Ukraine (1996) - are excluded from the comparison.

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² We restrict the discussion to the seven parties that have satisfied Sartori's (1976) criteria of relevance for at least a whole legislative term.

³ In Hungarian political parlance “right-wing” stands for a Christian-nationalist and/or anticommunist orientation, while “left” is associated with the socialist-communist legacy and, among elites, with a libertarian-cosmopolitan orientation.

⁴ In the new label “Fidesz” only refers to the Latin root of the party's previous name, and does not stand for “Alliance of Young Democrats” any more.

⁵ We avoid gender-neutral language because all premiers to date were men.

⁶ Kurtán *et al.* (annual) published self-reported membership data for seven years, which put the combined membership of the parliamentary parties at 198,400, 228,200, 234,200, 193,360, 225,500, 224,880, 106,100, 118,000 106,001 in 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003, and 2004, respectively. The apparent drop in 2002 is mainly due to the fact that FKGP, which claimed the largest membership in Hungary, failed to make it into the parliament. Note, however, that FKGP membership reports were considered grossly inflated by most observers.

⁷ The percentage figures cited in the text are half the sum of the absolute differences between the percentage distribution of party list votes in successive parliamentary elections.

⁸ The MSZP's local organizations have a considerable autonomy, though (Van Biezen 1997).

⁹ A similar situation exists in MIÉP, which is, however, dominated by its leader. In 2002 Fidesz-MPP also introduced party ballots into its statute, but the party presidium still retains the right of ultimate decision, while in MSZP the will of one-tenth of the members can compel the party leadership.

¹⁰ As for exceptions, in the KDNP the regional organs, and in the SZDSZ the party presidium – in conjunction with the regional boards - decide about the lists.

¹¹ Roughly 70 percent of incumbent mayors are regularly re-elected in local elections (Dénes and Kiss 2003).

¹² See *HVG*, 21 August 1999, p. 63.

¹³ The effective number of legislative parties is calculated the same way as the effective number of electoral parties, except that the percentage distribution of seats (rather than votes) in the election is used as the input data.

¹⁴ In Ágh's (1995) words, the "political existence" of Hungarian parties is stronger than their "social existence".