

**CONSIDERING THE CHANGE OF THE NEO-COMMUNIST PARTIES IN  
POWER IN CENTRAL EUROPE :  
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF POLISH  
AND HUNGARIAN CASES**

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**Abstract**

*The 1990s have witnessed many structural changes in the Central and Eastern European countries after the “Velvet Revolutions” and today all these states have been gradually becoming members of the EU and have also become involved in cooperation for an integrated European security architecture. In their domestic politics, it is also possible to consider the impact of the post-Communist transition on their political restructuring. As there have been many governmental changes in Central and Eastern European countries since the beginning of the 1990s, external factors have seemed to influence the political process at domestic level. To study all these phenomena, we prefer to limit our research to the Polish and Hungarian cases. The people in these countries are expecting such high sensitivity for their own socioeconomic concerns from the politicians in power, while the political structures, especially the neo-Communists, aim to restructure their own discourse in the political life. Given the general failure of the neo-Communist parties in general and presidential elections, this work aims to find out the reasons for that decline within the context of international and domestic factors in Central Europe from a comparative perspective. Such study is also an attempt to answer the question whether there is some linkage between the external and internal factors within this new process.*

**Key Words**

Central Europe, Poland, Hungary, Post-Communism, Neo-Communist parties, Social Democracy, Power

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## **Introduction**

The year 1989 seemed to be the end in Central and Eastern Europe, not only for communist rule, but for any political party ever associated with Marxism-Leninism. With the disappearance of the Iron Curtain, the previously ruling communist parties underwent change one by one – they gave up their monopoly on power, lost elections, and endured public criticism by citizens they had once cowed into silent submission. Most of the Central and Eastern European communist parties seemed to have fallen into what Marx once termed the “dustbin of history” while writing about capitalism. Where former communists remained in power, as in the case of Albania, Romania, and Yugoslavia, they seemed involved in a great game of claiming democratic structures, holding torn elections, but then ruling on as authoritarian nationalists. After the failed August coup in Moscow and the December 1991 breakup of the USSR into fifteen new states, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) fell too.

The new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have avoided the rise to power of non-liberal forces and, in spite of widespread corruption, there is a growing consensus towards the desirability of free markets, free media, and pluralist institutions. However, the situation differs from country to country; the transitions took place within the difficult and problematic conditions in the eastern part of Europe, especially in Romania and Bulgaria, during the 1990s. As many observers have noted, the success of democratization in these countries depends on the promotion of political moderation within the major political parties; within this context, the former communist parties are playing a vital role in conditioning the scope and development of politics with their organizational assets and political discourses in the face of current socioeconomic challenges of post-communist transition.

This new period was one of the final manifestations of a worldwide spread of democratization in the twentieth century. As termed by S. Huntington, the “third wave of democratization” took place with the timing and modalities of the changes of political regimes and the structural conditions within the international system since the 1970s. The debate on the role of political regimes (parliamentarism or presidentialism) in the development of the new democracies may establish correlations between institutional restructuring and continuity of democratic values, but our work

here aims not to discuss the typology of regimes in the new democracies, but to concentrate on how the Central European communist successor parties have transformed their political discourse within the post-ideological transition process and how the experience of being in power changed them over time. For this purpose, this study will be limited to the Central European countries with the Polish and Hungarian cases, as the Eastern European political geography includes many different other examples with complex dynamics; in this way, this article seeks to investigate the extent to which the discourse of the neo-communist parties in Poland and Hungary have changed over time, particularly in accordance with the reality of power.

### **Back to Power in Post-Communist Period: First Political Success of the Communist Successor Parties in Central Europe**

In this paper, we prefer to concentrate only on the lower houses of the legislatures when focusing on the results of legislative elections. Focusing on lower house elections could be justified for two purposes: first, not all of the emerging constitutional systems in CEE are identical, and second, as we have just noted, some of the CEE countries have bicameral systems. On that point, we should underline that some examples have semi-presidential systems, where a relatively powerful and directly elected executive exists in Poland and that the executive power has sought some harmony with the lower houses of parliament. At this point, we should note that the presidential elections do not reflect directly the electoral performance of the political parties, because the individual factors become very important from the point of view of voters, who prefer to choose their president as an executive leader, not as a representative of the political parties.

Opting for a semi-presidential regime with constitutional amendments in the mid-1990s, Poland has differed its political transformation, like Bulgaria and Romania, from the other CEE countries by opting for universal suffrage in presidential elections. Like in the Bulgarian and Slovakian cases, Hungary preferred the unicameral legislative system, while the remaining states in CEE have bicameral systems. Just after the revolutions of 1989, we witnessed an outbreak of political parties in the CEE political landscape. For example, twenty-nine parties entered the Polish Sejm after the 1990 elections. With the exception of the Czech Communist Party (KSČM), all the Communist parties in CEE decided to change their name. The majority of communist successor parties were reasserting themselves during the first

period from 1992 until 1996, while they were in a relative decline between 1996 and 2000 and, for some, a rising position during the first half of the 2000s. From the late 1990s, it is possible to witness again the ascension of some of them, in parallel with the decline of liberal or neo-conservative parties due to their failure in socio-economic policies.

Western reports on the first pluralist elections at the beginning of the 1990s in Central Europe were headlined as the defeat of the left and the victory of the centre-right wing parties, who also thought that the left was basically dead and had no future in the long run. For them, this represented the end not only of Communism, but also of all the leftist currents. However, this perception was the product of such euphoria over the collapse of communism in CEE; in reality, this assessment was contradicted both in society and in the political life. Taken together with the other leftist votes in the Hungarian legislative elections in 1990, the overall support for the left was well over 20 %, and considering the large block of non-voters, it was potentially stronger. In the 1994 elections, the *MSzP* won the majority and held 54 % of the mandates in the parliament; by forming a coalition with the Free Democrats, together they held a 72 % majority in the legislature. It is possible to witness a similar trend in Poland where the electorate voted for the left-wing parties (*SLD+PSL*) in excess of 20 % in the first post-communist elections in 1991 and the *SLD-PSL* coalition obtained more than 35 % of the votes in the 1993 legislative elections.<sup>2</sup>

### **Organisational Changes in the Communist Successor Parties**

Most of the literature on “communist successor parties” has focused on why these parties made a political comeback in the 1990s. For J. Ishimaya, two explanations could be presented to answer why the successors of the formerly dominant communist parties have returned to the political scene. The first one, what he labels the “internalist perspective”, “*contends that the communist successor parties have succeeded because of organizational adaptations in the newly competitive environment. [Within this aspect,] the nature of the previous regime affected the ability of the communist successor*

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<sup>2</sup> In comparison with their Central European partners, the communist successor parties in Eastern Europe have showed a different trend of political success, by conserving their electoral popularity just after the Velvet Revolutions and losing popular support in the midst of 1990s.

parties to adapt to new political circumstances.” As stronger institutions with stable organizational continuity, the successor parties were able to inherit at least some of their predecessors’ membership, organizational networks and material resources together with some pre-existing levels of party identification among particular segments of the electorate.<sup>3</sup>

The second approach, labelled the “externalist perspective”, “holds that the relative political success of these parties has been due to the features of the political environment, particularly the “nostalgia factor” and the structure of competition facing the successor parties.” In Ishiyama’s analysis, the internalist perspective holds that with the liberal and quasi-pluralist structures inherited from the previous regimes, the “reformist leaders” took the control of the party by adopting the rules of democratic competition and by imposing new infrastructures within their parties. For some authors, the degree of tolerance within the previous regimes for internal competition and of bureaucratic institutionalization explained the successes of the parties perceived as the “traditional mass parties” like the *SLD* in Poland and the *MSzP* in Hungary.<sup>4</sup>

The “nostalgia factor” is also used by some scholars to explain the success of the former communist parties; they have suggested that the decline of living standards during the transition period made many people yearn for a return to a more secure past, hence increasing the degree of electoral support for the communist successor parties.<sup>5</sup> Facing the

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<sup>3</sup> J. Ishiyama, “Party Organization and the Political Success of the Communist Successor Parties”, *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 82, No. 4, 2001, pp. 846-847.

<sup>4</sup> P.G. Lewis, *Party Structure and Organizations in East Central Europe*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publ., 1996, pp. 1-19. Some authors suggest that another model of communist successor parties is run by a political elite and professional party apparatus as organizations providing political services to a constituted electoral clientele; for this model, Roper gives the example of *PSDR* in Romania. S.D. Roper, “The Romanian Party System and the Catch-all Party Phenomenon”, *East European Quarterly*, Vol. 28, 1995, pp. 518-532; S.D. Roper, “Is there an economic basis for post-communist voting? Evidence from Romanian elections, 1992-2000”, *East European Quarterly*, Vol. 37 (1), 2003., pp 56-78.

<sup>5</sup> A. Mahr and J. Nagle, “Resurrection of the Successor Parties and Democratization in East-Central Europe”, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 28, 1995, pp. 393-409; Ekman, J. and Linde J., “Communist Nostalgia and the Consolidation of Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe”, *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 3, 2005, pp. 354-374.

uncertainties provoked by the rapid political and economic changes or of the great frustration with the “failures” of the market reform policies, the electorate has shown increasing nostalgia and greater political support for these parties (as in the Romanian and Bulgarian cases).

For some countries in this region, the key explanation for the political success of the communist successor parties has been the lack of real competition facing them; from this perspective, their electoral success has been due more to their organizational characteristics than to the lack of effective competition posed by parties that occupied the same ideological space in CEE. As the other party structures emerge within the same ideological space, the opportunity for the communist successor parties to justify the legitimacy of their political discourse decreases, as is the case of the KSČM vis-à-vis the ČSSD in Czech Republic.<sup>6</sup> In short, it was the successor parties in Poland and Hungary that experienced the most dramatic political transformations and electoral successes.

Many researchers have argued that the political formations in CEE are likely to develop as centralized bodies with a low membership base and elite leadership groups that play a predominant role. Kopecky notes that the new parties in this political landscape are likely to develop as formations with loose electoral constituencies, in which a relatively uncertain role is to be played by the party membership and the dominant role by the party leaders.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, there is such a distinction between the newly established post-transitional parties built up after the collapse of communism in 1989 and the successor parties that descended from those permitted under communism and have a longer organizational continuity.

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<sup>6</sup> A. Bozoki and J. Ishiyama (eds), *The Communist Successor Parties of Central and Eastern Europe*, NYC: M.E. Sharpe, 2002. The Communist party (KSČM) remained a small retrograde political force, representing the orthodox pro-Soviet collaborationist core that had imposed hard-line rule after the Warsaw Pact invasion, which ended the reform movement of the “Prague Spring” in 1968. While the pre-World War II Czechoslovak Social Democratic Party reappeared in the late 1990s as a relatively important force, the renamed Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia was slow to change or play any significant role in the Parliament, despite attracting a growing protest vote by spring 2002.

<sup>7</sup> P. Kopecky, “Developing Party Organizations in East-Central Europe: What Type of Party is Likely to Emerge?”, *Party Politics*, Vo. 1, No. 4, 1995, pp. 515-544; P. Mair, *Party System Change: Approaches and Interpretations*, Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997, pp. 175-198.

## Ideological Discussions on Neo-Communism and Social-Democratisation

The change in political discourse has taken shape between two aspects: moving progressively towards social democracy or retreating backwards towards communism. This fragmentation could be also analyzed with the differentiation of political approaches on economic measures (pro-market and anti-market initiatives). For Ishimaya and Bozoki, the pro-reform and anti-reform discourses have included different references, which have progressively developed within the post-communist transition. The pro-reform index is constituted with references to social democracy, democratic socialism, and market economy structures (capitalism, privatization, etc.), while the anti-reformist discourse refers to the controlled economy model, socialist values and communism.

In addition to the reformist indices, Ishimaya and Bozoki developed another type of index by taking into account the national and patriotic themes to which these parties made reference. For these authors, these themes include any reference to the glorification of national values, patriotism, protection of the national culture and traditions and national unity. They also develop a “humanist index”, in which they emphasize the appeal to human rights, international cooperation, and the respect and adaptation of the European values; at that point, it seems that the “patriotic vision” versus the humanist index symbolizes the divide between the national (identitary) particularism and universalism.<sup>8</sup>

For a great number of authors, the relative transformation of communist successor parties into the modern social democratic discourse can be identified by the historical features of the social democratic movements in CEE. However we should underline that social democracy in post-communist Europe occupies a prominent position in some countries, because the social democratic discourses are limited historiographically to Western Europe and to the German-speaking countries of Central Europe. In 1948, with the beginning of the Cold War period, the East European social democracy ceased to exist and its organizations had been forced to merge

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<sup>8</sup> J.Ishimaya and A. Bozoki, “Adaptation and Change: Characterizing the Survival Strategies of the Communist Successor Parties”, *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 3, September 2001, pp. 38-39.

with the ruling communist parties and trade unions. Especially in the Central European countries, the social democratic arguments remained present as a set of ideas that gained traction in various political currents, from communist revisionism and reformism to anti-communist opposition.<sup>9</sup> For Gerrits, they bridge the pre-communist and post-communist eras<sup>10</sup> in his work, he supposed that social democracy has emerged in CEE countries from three different sources: first, the re-founded historical parties of the interwar period; second, the reformist currents in the communist parties and finally, the left-wing of opposition and citizens' movements.

Since 1989, the pre-communist party formations have failed to become major political actors; it is possible to consider the only example of a historical social democratic party which made a successful reappearance on the political scene in the Czech Republic with the *ČSSD*. However, only the reformed communist parties became notable political forces after the Velvet Revolutions, as was the case for Poland's *SLD* and *PSL* and Hungary's *MSzP*. Even though they lost elections after ruling for one term in the mid-1990s, they were able to maintain their electoral popularity. The *MSzP* won 32.6 % of the vote in 1994, 32.9 % in 1998 and 42.1% in 2002; however its loss in parliamentary seats was supposed to be largely due to the country's complicated electoral system. In Poland, the *SDL* received 20.4 % of the popular vote in 1993, 27.1 % in 1997 and 41% in 2001 and begun to lose popularity with the following general elections in 2005 and 2007, while the *PSL* has showed a changing trend in obtaining the electoral support: 15.4 % in 1993, 7.3 % in 1997, 9 % in 2001, 7 % in 2005 and 9 % in 2007.

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<sup>9</sup> J. Sloam, "West European Social Democracy as a model of transfer", *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2005, pp. 67-83.

<sup>10</sup> A.W.M. Gerrits, "The Social Democratic Tradition of East Central Europe", *East European Politics and Societies*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2002, pp. 56-57.

**Table 1 - Changes in vote for neo-communist parties in Hungarian and Polish legislatures (lower chambers)<sup>11</sup>**

Countries	Election s 1	Election s 2	Elections 3	Elections 4	Election s 5	Elections 6
<b>Hungary</b>	1990	1994	1998	2002	2006	
Hungarian Socialist Party MSzP – Magyar Szocialista Part	10.89 %	32.99 %	32.92 %	42.1 %	43.21 %	
<b>Poland</b>	1991	1993	1997	2001	2005	2007
Coalition of Democratic Left Alliance / Union of Labour - Koalicja Sojuszu Lewicy Demokratycznej i Unii Pracy (SLD+UP)	11.48 %	20.4 %	27.1 % + 4.7 %	41 %	11.3 %	13.1% ( <u>Left and Democrats</u> ( <i>Lewica i Demokraci LiD</i> ))
Polish Peasant Party – Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe PSL	8.67 %	15.4 %	7.3 %	9 %	7 %	8.9%

### **Example for the Pro-reform Party Structure : Neo-Communism in Hungary and the Impact of the Ancien Régime**

Founded in October 1989 as the successor to the *MSzMP* (Hungarian Socialist Workers Party), the *MSzP* (Hungarian Socialist Party) has proven to be one of the most electorally successful of the communist successor parties in the political geography of post-Communist transition; it became the governing party in 1994 by sharing power with the liberals, although it obtained the majority within the Parliament. Even with the electoral defeat in

<sup>11</sup> www.electionworld.org.

1998 and in 2002 and 2006, the *MSzP* received the largest proportion of the popular vote and remained the largest single party in the Hungarian legislature. The key to the success of the *MSzP* has been its ability to adapt itself to the changing political circumstances and to the demands of electoral competition.

For many analysts, the psychological shock of neo-liberal transformation from reform communism to a market economy has played an important role in the electoral triumph of the left; it is very understandable that the political success of the left resulted from the gradual transition. Even though the victory was very certain for the socialists, the party leader G. Horn called for social reconciliation and rapprochement by inviting the Free Democrats to form a coalition as a political alliance to carry out the bitter task of economic stabilization and to strengthen the legitimation of its power.<sup>12</sup>

It is possible to see the same electoral image after the 2002 legislative elections with the *MSzP* increasing its popular vote, but with the same destiny of “victory in defeat” due to the right wing parties obtaining a majority within the parliament because of the electoral system. As a consequence, it is possible to suggest there is a three-way division of society between the liberals, the conservative and the left parties. After the 1998 elections, the shift of liberal parties towards the conservative category necessitated the projection of a “new centre forces organization”, but Hungarian politics seem to be categorically withdrawn towards the right and left poles with the accentuation of political discourse on national elements.<sup>13</sup>

The *MSzP*'s separation from the former *MSzMP*'s philosophical base was not complete, but the new party had experienced leadership and a nationwide organization. The *MSzP* claimed to be the heir to progressive thinking and reform communism with the objective of democratic socialism; by seeking integration into the western parties organizations, especially with its application for membership status in the Socialist International, the party

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<sup>12</sup> B. Racz, “The Hungarian Socialists in Opposition: Stagnation or Renaissance”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 52 No. 2, 2000, p. 325.

<sup>13</sup> K. Benoit, “Like déjà vu all over again: The Hungarian Parliamentary Elections of 2002”, *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, Vol. 18, No. 4, 2002, pp. 119-133; Racz, B., “The Left in Hungary and the 2002 Parliamentary Elections”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 55, No 5, 2003, pp. 747-769.

leadership aimed to adopt the Western social democracy discourse in order to increase its popularity in society. After the 1990 elections, the socialists held their second congress, which settled the identity of the party by distancing itself from the old ideology. The next focus was on a “social democratic orientation”, which opened the way later to potential cooperation with the liberal parties. With this change, the *MSzP* managed to present itself as the only viable counterweight to the right wing parties.

For many authors, the success in adapting itself to post-Communist transformation is derived in part from the legacy of the previous regime, especially the Kadarist period. As A. Agh indicated,<sup>14</sup> the *MSzP* was unique in the communist world in that it emerged “before the collapse of the state socialism” and not after it, unlike all the other ones renamed and, afterwards “reformed”, parties of the post-Communist world. The party has benefited from this advantage, because the nature of the system in Hungary before the collapse of socialism gave rise to the emergence of a large “Europeanized reform intelligentsia” as well as a mass base within the old *MSzMP*. As a result, the successor *MSzP* found itself well-stocked with individual leaders at both the national and regional levels. As a result of this early organizational transformation, the *MSzP* was also the first of the communist parties to transform itself into a modern European left wing party.<sup>15</sup> Ideologically, the party is rooted in the internationalist principles of the Socialist International and the Stockholm declaration. Like in the European ones, the Hungarian socialists seem to include the tolerance of different views: they are more free from anti-semitism, less nationalistic, have a democratic party structure and represent the policy of historical reconciliation toward the neighbouring countries with Hungarian minorities.<sup>16</sup>

On the other side, it is possible to compare the infrastructure types of the Hungarian parties; for some analysts, the liberal *Fidesz* has been shown to have an elitist infrastructure, while the *MSzP* has a bureaucratic one. This quality of *MSzP* is in many ways a legacy of its communist past; here, it is

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<sup>14</sup> A. Agh, “Partial Consolidation of the East-Central European Parties: the Case of the Hungarian Socialist Party”, *Party Politics*, Vol. 1 No. 1, 1995, p. 492.

<sup>15</sup> J. Ishimaya, “The Sickle and the Rose? Previous regime types and the evolution of the ex-Communist Parties in post-Communist politics”, *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 3, 1997, pp. 258-274.

<sup>16</sup> B. Racz, *op.cit.*, pp. 326-327.

very important to indicate the role of the “late Kadar technocracy”.<sup>17</sup> In 1994, the composition of the party elites was changed with the departures of the former communist members to the other small parties in opposition. The older *nomenklatura* members were gradually replaced by a younger reform generation who were largely educated under the party-state.

### **Neo-Communist Parties in Poland and Electoral Performances: SLD and PSL**

In Poland, a stable, democratic, multi-party political system has evolved during the last half-decade and major improvements have been made in the development of democratic political and legal institutional structures. The comeback of the communist successor parties in power did not create any popular shock, because they both have profited by their legacy and their good image from the old regime, which led to the nostalgia factor for the people whose standards of living had deteriorated under the shock therapy reforms. The Polish communist successor parties comprise the organizational heirs of the former communist party and its agrarian ally: the Democratic Left Alliance (*Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej - SLD*) and the Polish Peasant Party (*Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe - PSL*). Both successor parties were direct beneficiaries of a substantial organizational inheritance. The *PSL* was the only party with a significant rural base, while the *SLD*, mainly urban in character, also had an organizational network in towns. This relative superiority was rooted in organizational legacies that they inherited from their predecessors, the *PZPR* and its satellite *ZSL*.<sup>18</sup>

The political left was voted into power in free national elections in Poland in September 1993. In Poland, the Democratic Left Alliance (*SLD*), dominated by the Social Democratic Party (*SdRP*), the successor of the Communist Party, won a plurality in the elections, garnering 20.4 % of the popular vote, compared with 11.9 % in 1991. The *SLD* forged a parliamentary and governmental partnership with the left-centrist Polish Peasant Party (*PSL*), a former communist satellite party that won 15 % of the

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<sup>17</sup> J. Toole, “Straddling the East-West Divide: Party Organisation and Communist Legacies in East Central Europe”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 55 (1), 2003, pp. 108-109; R. Tökés, *Hungary’s Negotiated Revolution*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press., 1996, pp. 361-362.

<sup>18</sup> A. Szczerbiak, “Testing Party Models in East-Central Europe”, *Studia Polityczne*, Vol. 10, 2000, pp. 85- 106.

votes. The *SLD*'s coalition with the *PSL* was not a harmonious one and it was beset by presidential obstructionism under L. Wałęsa.<sup>19</sup>

In the 1995 presidential elections, A. Kwaśniewski was the leader and unchallenged candidate of the *SLD*; he was also considered to be the leading strategist behind the transformation of the neo-communists into the social democrats, but the other political parties revealed their basic weakness throughout the campaign and Wałęsa's unpopularity left no figure around which the Solidarity-led parties could unite. On the other side, there was little difference between the main candidates' programmatic aims of continuing the reforms and accession to NATO and the EU. Kwaśniewski became associated with secular humanistic values through his speeches and also benefited from the welfare-orientation of the *SLD-PSL* coalition by convincing the electorate that he could reject the old-style communist authoritarian practices. In the November 1995 elections, Kwaśniewski won the majority in the second ballot with 51.7 % of the votes. He repeated his electoral success in the 2000 elections with a decisive victory on the first ballot, by being nominally a non-party candidate and benefiting greatly from the full support of the *SLD* leadership and party apparatus.

Between these neo-communist parties, the *PSL* seems to be the largest Polish party in pure numerical terms, claiming nearly 200,000 members in 2000.<sup>20</sup> For Szczerbiak, the *PSL* and the *SLD* bore a closer resemblance to the "mass party model" in terms of relatively higher levels of membership.<sup>21</sup> It was formed in May 1990 as the organizational successor to the former communist satellite United Peasant Party (*ZSL*). The party leaders attempt to draw on the historical traditions of the Polish (pre-war) agrarian-populist movement, which dated from the end of the nineteenth century, and had provided the main political opposition to the Communists during the post-war years. The *PSL* won the second largest number of seats and was the junior coalition partner in the 1993-1997 parliament. After the September elections in 1997, it was reduced to being the fourth largest grouping in the Sejm with its share of the vote halved to 7.3 %, while it took back its

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<sup>19</sup> F. Millard, "Party Development and the Polish Presidential Election of October 2000", *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 2001, p. 382.

<sup>20</sup> A. Szczerbiak, "The Polish Peasant Party: A Mass Party in Post-Communist Eastern Europe", *East European Politics and Societies*, Vol. 15, No. 3, 2001, pp. 554-588.

<sup>21</sup> Szczerbiak, A., "The New Polish Political Parties as Membership Organizations", *Contemporary Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2001, pp. 57-69.

electorate in the 2001 elections by obtaining 9 % of the votes. The party remained the key player and strong contender for the mantle of the third force in Polish politics with its neo-agrarian ideology.

During the first half of the 1990s, the *PSL* was criticized as being a centralized and leader-dominated party under its leader Pawlak's direction; this criticism was replaced with many discussions to re-orient the party's political discourse under the leadership of J. Kalinowski within the adaptation process. With this vision, the *PSL* is now defined as one of the most state-oriented parties in post-communist Poland.<sup>22</sup>

From the point of view of membership, the second largest party is the *SLD* with 90,000 members at the beginning of 2000. Until it transformed itself into a single political party in April 1999, the *SLD* could have been considered to be an electoral coalition comprising around 30 parties, trade unions and social organizations that had enjoyed patronage during the communist era. However, it was dominated by the Social Democracy of the Republic of Poland (*SdRP*) that was formed as the direct organizational successor to the communist Polish United Workers' Party (*PZPR*) at its congress in January 1990. The *SLD* also included the All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions (*OPZZ*) that had been closely linked to the previous regime. A large proportion of *SdRP*-*SLD* members, strongly identified with the pre-1989 regime, had a clear personal interest in opposing "decommunization" in its widest sense and supported some aspects of the communist rule; this gave the party a relatively well-defined pool of potential recruits. It is estimated that approximately half of the *SdRP* members were formerly in the *PZPR*.<sup>23</sup> The *SLD*'s leaders mostly come from the youngest generation of elites who began their careers within the old communist party; thanks to their past positions, the ex-communist elites often had an edge over their non-communist counterparts in terms of knowledge, skills, personal contacts.

The *SLD* was the largest grouping and senior government coalition partner during the 1993-1997 parliament, although it was reduced to second place in September 1997 in spite of increasing its share of the vote. In June 1999, the *SdRP* was absorbed into the *SLD* providing most of the leadership

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<sup>22</sup> A. Szczerbiak, "The Polish Peasant Party...", op.cit.

<sup>23</sup> A. Szczerbiak, "Party Structure and Organizational Development in Post-Communist Poland", *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 2001, p. 116.

of the new party.<sup>24</sup> In the September 2001 elections, the *SLD* triumphed by obtaining 41 % of the popular vote, although the populists and the ultra-conservative parties have become a worryingly large minority within the Sejm. An ex-apparatchik, the prime minister and leader of the *SLD*, L. Miller expounded pro-market, pro-EU and pro-NATO statements during his electoral campaigns.<sup>25</sup>

Beginning with the 2005 elections, the *SLD* showed a dramatic decrease in its own electoral performance as Kwaśniewski's presidential term ended and the conservative leanings gained acceleration into the Polish political scene. With the rise of conservative right-wing parties during the second half of the 2000s and the increasing role of the Church into the society, neo-communism remained under the influence of the new political discussions. A new party with the name of Left and Democrats (*Lewica i Demokraci, LiD*) was created in 2006 before the elections to form a new idea of coalition in the left wing by including the *SLD* and the other small left parties.

#### **The Impact of the EU as a New Element on the Development of National Political Structures: Reaction or Consentment of Society?**

During the post-communist transition, the change in the discourse of the parties reflects no doubt about the evolution of the political culture; this trend represents the real aspects of the democratization in the country. On the other side, this change has had direct impact on the political elites, which base their own legitimacy on these discourses. Perceived as the main decision-makers at the top level, the party elites and leaders themselves define the limits of these discourses and represent the party's interests by generalizing the expectations of their members. When the party elites take part in an institutionalized process of decision-making, this political discourse should unavoidably include the governmental arguments and be flexible toward any systemic assumptions. Because of the impact of systemic variables during the post-communist transition, all the CEE governments were not able to act freely in their domestic and foreign policy ventures. In particular, the imposition of the Copenhagen criteria within the EU integration process could be given as a very spectacular example to observe how the anti-reformist parties could not be totally free in their strategies.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> "The Left is Back – in the Centre", *Economist*, 29 September 2001, Issue 8241.

While observing the political dimension of the post-communist transition, it is possible to consider the change in the infrastructure and discourses of the political parties between two poles: liberalization or radicalization. The liberalizing parties have slipped toward the centre during the post-ideological transformation, while the parties with orthodox leanings have preferred to adopt the extremist perspectives. The interaction between the change in the discourses of the political parties and the systemic variables could be explained as a model of open-closed relationship; as the centre parties have adopted more flexible tones toward the external dynamics, the conservative elites have exposed reactionary tendencies against the initiatives from the international system. As a result, this model of interaction could be better observed within the stage of transformation of the discourse of the political parties, when they assume executive responsibility in the State apparatus after the democratic elections.

The Western institutions have been a very important means for all the CEE countries in the search for integration into the international system after 1989. While Hungary and Poland signed their association agreements with the EC in 1991, the other CEE countries progressively signed these contracts in order to fasten their rapprochement with the Europeans. At this point, it is very important to underline that the applications for membership to the European integration were made mostly by the CEE governments dominated with the neo-communist formations, with the only exceptions being the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Even though there exist great differences between the socioeconomic data of the CEE countries during the post-communist era, the discourse on the integration into the Western institutions became a “state policy” for all the CEE governments. This “policy” should be perceived as the most important part of the transformation strategies relating to the post-communist transition; it also represents the internal dimension of the Western support for all the countries on the way to liberalization and a market economy after 1989. Within the stage of adaptation to the liberal norms, the steps for the democratization of political culture should be taken in parallel with the economic reforms and this change has led to the institutional searches to attract the interests of Western entrepreneurs in the national markets and to obtain political legitimacy to implement reform strategies at the national level. On this point, it is very important to observe the support of many

communist successor parties in CEE for the idea of integration into the Western institutions.<sup>26</sup> The purposes of integration could be analyzed from two main perspectives: a) regional security concerns, which have necessitated the CEE countries' membership to NATO and b) economic and political expectations toward the EU integration.<sup>27</sup> For some authors, the West was forcing the CEE governments to introduce reforms to reflect Western models (especially in the minority and migration issues), before they join the EU and NATO; in the Madrid Summit in July 1998, NATO leaders invited the three Central European states with the best performances to join the organization and all the Central European states became EU members in 2004. On their part, the CEE populations seem to support with strong majorities the strategies of joining the EU and NATO; however it is very interesting to witness the change in rhetoric in political leaders defending the "cause for total integration with the West".<sup>28</sup>

In Hungary, it is possible to underline the positive steps that the socialist-liberal coalition took for foreign policies after the 1993 elections; by attracting Western capital investment and prevailing the public order and the rule of law, the Horn government made significant progress towards EU and NATO integration. The sensitive issues of the Hungarians living abroad had a new tone compared with in the former regime: a historical reconciliation with the neighbouring states advocated by the government was partly successful – Romania responded favourably, while the Slovakian government responded negatively.<sup>29</sup> In 1997, the completion of the basic treaty with Romania created new opportunities for the development of bilateral relations; in 1996, under the pressure of the Western countries, the Hungarian government concluded a treaty of understanding, collaboration, and good neighbourliness with Romania. This treaty stated that neither side

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<sup>26</sup> M. Dauderstadt, "The Communist Successor Parties of Eastern and Central Europe and European Integration", *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2005, pp. 48-66.

<sup>27</sup> C. Haerper, C. Milosinski, and C. Wallace, "Old and New Security Issues in Post-Communist Eastern Europe: Results of an 11 Nation Study", *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 51 Noç 6, 1999, pp. 989-1011.

<sup>28</sup> A. Batory, "Attitudes to Europe: Ideology, Strategy and the Issue of the EU membership in Hungarian Party Politics", *Party Politics*, Vol. 8, No. 5, 2002, pp. 525-539.

<sup>29</sup> The major concern of the Hungarian governments towards its neighbours in CEE, in particular Slovakia and Romania, is concentrated on the presence of Hungarian-speaking minorities in those countries. Hungarians make up about 10 % of Slovakia's population and 9 % in Romania.

has any territorial claims against the other, thereby affirming for all Hungarians the recognition of the permanent loss of Transylvania to Romania.<sup>30</sup> After the signing of this treaty, an era of rapprochement has seemed to have begun between the two countries, as L. Kovacs, foreign minister in Horn's government, expressed Hungary's support of Romania's membership in the EU and NATO, during his official visit in Bucharest.<sup>31</sup>

In Poland, the political discourse supporting the strategy of integration with the West has been mostly pronounced by the elected presidents; for this purpose, it is possible to observe this theme in Kwaśniewski's presidential statements and electoral speeches, giving great importance to integration into Western institutions. The adoption of social-liberal synthesis as political discourse among the Polish neo-communists has created no doubt in many discussions at the political elites' level, but this could be considered to be a structural change of the political body through their liaison with the private sector or by their educational careers in the Western countries.<sup>32</sup>

On the other side, the Polish neo-communists' tendencies to shift towards the centrist approaches could be explained as attracting public support for the Westernist perspectives in the face of the anti-integrationist discourses of nationalist and ultra-catholic formations. The *SDL* leaders are very well aware of the advantages of being in power, while Poland achieves progressively the integration process with NATO and the EU; through this means, Western support is considered to guarantee both the political success of the ruling parties and the stabilization of internal dynamics with the westernizing values.<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusion

There is no question that CEE democracies are undergoing a process of learning, both on the part of politicians as well as that of voters. This process

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<sup>30</sup> This treaty also included a statement on minority rights endorsed by the Council of Europe that had required Romania to bring an end to discrimination against its Hungarian populations.

<sup>31</sup> M.F. Goldman, M.F., *Russia, the Eurasian Republics and the Central/Eastern Europe*, Guilford: McGraw-Hill, 2001, pp. 146-147.

<sup>32</sup> P. Buras, "Polish Social Democracy, Policy Transfer and Programmatic Change", *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2005, pp. 84-104.

<sup>33</sup> M. Dauderstadt, op.cit..

takes place within a rather tumultuous environment of macroeconomic stabilization and microeconomic institutional reform policies. Important lessons about the CEE transitions can be learned from the neo-communists' return to political dominance. First, the popular memory appears short about the negative aspects of the communist period and many citizens have developed an apparent "nostalgia" about its benefits, such as social welfare and basic economic security. Second, for the overwhelming majority of the population, the economic concerns are more important than the political considerations. Third, many voters saw through the negative electoral campaigns of the centre-right parties; such tactics proved counterproductive as the electorate understood that smearing the neo-communists evaded the real issues and concealed vague programs. Finally, voters are perceived a great part of the post-communist leaders to be lacking of highly-valued expertise and professionalism.

The role of international influences and international actors, especially the EU and NATO, in the CEE democracy-building process has been enormous. Political conditionality as incorporated into the EU's screening process stipulated what steps had to be undertaken at each stage to meet the standards of a consolidated democracy. The magnetism of a united Europe has played a decisive role in preventing anti-democratic forces from overthrowing the democratic institutions. The signing of the treaties of good neighbourhood between many of the CEE countries, the institutionalization of political guarantees for minorities are directly related to the conditionality exerted by the EU and its affiliated bodies on the political elites of the new democracies. Even though these challenges will take time to deal with, the important fact is that the new political elites have unanimously accepted the inevitability of integration process with liberal formations in world affairs and seem increasingly inclined to come to terms with the implications of globalizing processes.

The international environment in Europe looks favourable on the evolving role of the neo-communists in CEE. In this political landscape, the left is partly tied to the images of the former ruling communists and thus austerity measures undermine the left and reinforce the populist and conservatives forces. In addition to the problems of the new market economy and privatization stakes, the post-communist societies are faced with the accelerating pressures created by the technological modernization where the leftist parties seem to have a chance with their social democratic philosophy

based on political arguments such as social peace, solidarity, social justice and prosperity. By considering a serious change in the party apparatus and democracy in decision-making hierarchy, there would be no doubt that the emergence of a new generation of contemporary leaders could answer the needs of contemporary citizens on the way towards globalization and integration with Western values.