

Europeanization of Political Parties: Redefining Concepts in a United Europe

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'Europeanization' is a term widely used yet hard to define, and applying existing definitions to the new EU member states poses challenges. In the context of political parties and party change, identifying direct and indirect impacts of Europeanization is complicated by the strong effects of EU conditionality. A new framework for defining Europeanization may include re-examining how parties in new member states relate to the EU as a political and economic project. The EU may affect not merely organisational structures and programmes of parties, but also the shape of the party system itself. Where accession proved problematic, as in the Slovak case, development of complex EU-related policies may be impeded, with parties less concerned with uploading policy preferences. A better understanding the nature of party politics in Central and Eastern Europe will facilitate research about how they have been Europeanized.

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Introduction

Europeanization is a word which everyone intrinsically understands, yet in social science research it can be surprisingly hard to define. In everyday conversation, it is easily accepted as meaning that an institution is becoming more 'European', by which is normally understood both modern and resembling counterparts in neighbouring countries. However, scholarly literature in the EU studies field has developed a narrower and more scientific definition of the term, and one which poses substantial challenges for researchers looking at the politics and societies of recent accession states. This article highlights these difficulties by looking at some of the challenges faced when studying the effects of 'Europeanization' on political parties in the EU's new democracies. It looks first at the meaning of Europeanization, and examines the extent to which the literature on both Europeanization and political parties, and on party change in general, poses problems when applied to new EU member states. It then briefly illustrates these challenges in relation to the specific case of Slovakia, where the interaction of party politics and the EU has been particularly complex.

There are some indications that Europeanization effects on political parties at both the level of individual parties and party systems may be more profound than in old member states. It is suggested that west European frameworks for operationalizing the concept of Europeanization may add less to an

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understanding of politics in new member states than creating a new, and somewhat broader, framework for encapsulating Europeanization effects.

Europeanization and Party Change

Use of the term 'Europeanization' in scholarly literature has grown exponentially in recent years, as pointed out by Featherstone. (2003: 5) A recent textbook on the EU (Cini 2003) contained a chapter on Europeanization by Johan Olsen which started with a similar idea: 'Europeanization: A fashionable term, but is it useful?' Additionally, the use of the term is not uniform (Schimmelfennig – Sedelmeier 2005: 1): while Green Cowles, Caporaso and Risse (2001: 1) define it as 'the emergence and the development at the European level of distinct structures of governance' – that is, effectively as the process of European integration – it is more commonly understood as encompassing the domestic impacts of this process. Other definitions, such as Radaelli (2003), embrace both approaches, by suggesting that it is a two-way process that consists of processes of (a) construction (b) diffusion and (c) institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, 'ways of doing things', and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the EU policy process and then incorporated in the logic of domestic (national and subnational) discourse, political structures and public policies.

Such all-embracing definitions risk, however, confusing process and the impact of processes. Furthermore, while this definition is broad enough to encompass some changes that take place in a post-communist democracy, what it cannot express is that they are merely part of other, more fundamental changes taking place at the same time.

In the case of candidate states to the EU, there is a further danger that what is described as Europeanization may in fact be a narrower process of responding to EU conditionality, which Wallace (2000) suggested might more accurately be described as 'EU-ization'. Yet in a more recent work, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2005: 7) explicitly define 'Europeanization' as 'a process in which states adopt EU rules'. While this may appear an overly narrow understanding of the concept, this shift in definition to some extent reflects the actual processes that are taking place in contemporary Europe. Whereas research on Europeanization in Western Europe has tended to comprise detailed examination of narrow policy questions and discrete shifts in institutional organization, in new member states the effects of Europeanization are more stark. As a number of post-communist states have now joined the EU, the impact of conditionality lessens, and more general processes of Europeanization become evident. As Grabbe (2003: 303) has argued, in Central and Eastern Europe the effects of the EU are likely to be 'similar in nature, but

broad and deeper in scope' than those elsewhere in Europe. Discrete processes that have, in the case of 'old' member states, been studied at microlevel may well prove to be of far more major import in the 'new Europe'.

In the account that follows, Europeanization will primarily be understood as the domestic impact of the EU, in this case on political parties and party systems. Yet it should be noted that, as the severe constraints of conditionality are removed, Europeanization increasingly becomes a two-way process in which parties adapt to the new environment and change in an attempt to 'upload' their own policy preferences and influence decision-making at European level.

How, then, should Europeanization be examined when analyzing developments in the new EU member states? Ladrech (2002) suggested 'five areas of investigation for evidence of Europeanization in parties and party activity' (1) policy/programmatic content; (2) organizational; (3) patterns of party competition; (4) party-government relations; and (5) relations beyond the national party system. These can briefly be summarized as follows:

1. *Programmatic change.* This can be either change in attitude towards the EU; or increased mention of EU-related policies (Area of Freedom, Security and Justice; Economic and Monetary Union); or more frequent reference to the EU when discussing areas which are normally considered to fall under domestic politics. Alternatively, there can be mentions of the party's membership in a transnational grouping – something a number of parties in new member states did before their first European Parliament elections.

2. *Organizational change.* There is often little formal explicit structural change, but parties reach arrangements for communication with their MEPs, who may or may not be represented on certain party bodies.

3. *Patterns of party competition.* Several areas are encompassed here. Firstly, parties may exploit the EU or EU-related issues to position themselves advantageously in domestic party competition; or parties may be split and hence weakened by divides about 'Europe'; or coalition patterns may be altered by attitudes to Europe.

4. *Party-government relations.* This is relevant only where a party is in power. Governments participating in European Council meetings may negotiate in a way that displeases either their parties' MEPs, who will be influenced by their transnational party group; or they may face arguments with the party at home, which wishes to keep issues in the domestic domain where their influence is stronger.

5. *Relations beyond the national party system.* This is largely the activity of the transnational party groups, whose support is necessary to gain office within the European Parliament.

All five points can be applied to new EU member states, and prove relevant in the examination of a Slovak case study. However, in chronological terms, not all are equally fruitful foci of investigation at every point in the Europeanization of political parties in accession states. The third and the fifth factor – patterns of party competition and relations beyond the national party system – have clear explanatory power when looking at domestic political developments in the accession phase. Questions of policy adaptation, organizational change and intra-party relations become a more viable area for empirical research only once accession has taken place. This is not merely because parties are no longer engaging with EU conditionality and domestic competition in the face of the exigencies of obtaining membership, but are involved in the day-to-day process of negotiating interests as fully-fledged members of the EU. It is also because, simultaneously, the party systems are becoming more stable, with the attendant emergence of established parties with complex policy identities and organizational structures.

Such organizational issues provide fertile ground for detailed empirical research in the future, and theories of party change in general also appear initially hard to apply in the EU's new democracies, yet offer some insights for examining party change under the impact of the EU. Harmel (2003) has noted that there are three theories of party change. The first he terms the 'life-cycle approach'. This is difficult to apply in new democracies where parties are all early in their 'life-cycle', and also tended to be formed 'top down', rather than starting as mass movements. Nevertheless, when looking at adaptation to EU activity, it is notable that longer established parties even in the post-communist world's short 15-year life-span tend to be more successful actors in the European field than those that have only recently entered parliament. Their members are more likely to gain office in the European Parliament (committee chairs, vice chairs of party groups etc.); and at intergovernmental level they are less likely to provoke the sort of controversy caused, for example, by the Kaczyńskis' Law and Justice party in Poland.

The second is the 'system-level trends approach' of authors who have suggested that 'not only might new parties take different forms as the result of dramatic changes in relevant environments of parties, but that some older parties would also feel compelled to conform'. (Harmel 2003: 122) Again, the underlying assumption is that at least parts of the party system have enjoyed substantial temporal duration, with parties evolving from mass parties to catch-all parties and then cartel parties. System change theory is hard to apply in states where, arguably, instability is the core of the 'system' – if such can be deemed to exist. Yet it would be possible to argue, as in looking at party life-cycles, that what has happened in post-communist democracies is merely a telescoping of change processes that took far longer elsewhere in Europe.

Sudden democratization led to a mass movements being replaced by elite-led party machines in less than two decades, while the conditionality of EU accession brought about a marked change in the political environment. The third set of theories of party change is termed the 'discrete change approach', which encompasses both the external and internal factors that have roles to play in explaining organizational change. Europeanization is only one factor promoting change in the new EU member states, and because it is impacting on emergent parties in a rapidly -changing, fluid environment, its effect may go unnoticed or be hard to disaggregate from other processes. The Slovak case in particular underlines the extent to which electoral defeat promotes party change, and EU-related issues have clear relevance here, although they do not stand in isolation. An integrated approach is, therefore, more useful in exploring the rapid transformation that the political parties in the post-communist world have undergone since 1989.

It is in the area of party *system* change, however, that patterns of party competition in post-communist accession and candidate states may bring the most innovative insights into research on the Europeanization of political parties. It is largely accepted in theoretical literature that in earlier member states, the EU had relatively little influence on the shape of the party system. This case was put most clearly by Mair (2000: 28) when he noted that there was 'very little evidence of any direct impact' of European integration on the format and mechanics of national party systems. This finding is due partly to the fact that European influence is understood primarily as the explicit articulation of Euroscepticism. The format of the party system is deemed to have been changed by the EU where the emergence of a new party may be 'linked *directly* to the issue of European integration' (Mair 2000: 30), and such parties are found to be few and lacking substantial support or relevance at national level. The mechanics of a party system, the 'modes of interaction' between parties, has been changed if there is 'any new clustering of party blocs or camps' along the pro- vs. anti-European integration dimension, which would suggest 'either an impact on the level of polarisation in the system or the onset of a new – pro- vs. anti-European – dimension of party competition'. (Mair 2000: 31) The only outlier Mair detects where the EU has affected the party system is the United Kingdom. Since the 1997 election, the EU issue cross-cut the traditional left-right divide of British politics (Evans 1999), so that Lijphart (1999: 81) described partisan conflict there as having a medium-salience foreign policy issue dimension alongside the traditional high-salience socio-economic cleavage. This was the only case where alternative governing parties have significantly different platforms on EU membership, although since 2004, it has been joined by other cases such as Malta and arguably the Czech Republic and Poland. As pointed out by Taggart (1998), Eurosceptical stances

are usually taken by more extremist parties peripheral to their party systems, who may use the issue to distance themselves from others, without having to confront the realities of intergovernmental negotiation since they have no access to government office. Hooghe, Marks and Wilson (2002) have also commented that exclusion from government tends to lead to Euroscepticism, although the authors acknowledge an ideological element in the attitude towards the EU as well.

The difficulty of measuring only explicit Euroscepticism when determining EU impacts on party systems is that it overlooks the more discrete influences that the EU wields on parties. Mair notes that measuring only *direct* impacts of the EU on party systems, as he does in his article, is a grave limitation, since 'Europe increasingly imposes severe constraints on the policy manoeuvrability of governments and on the parties that make up those governments'. (Mair 2000: 27) Ladrech (2002: 204), in an analysis based on pre-2004 EU member states, notes that Mair's focus on direct impacts is problematic, since evidence of the Europeanization of political parties is yielded by investigating precisely those areas Mair regards as indirect impacts. This is a finding with which Mair (2006) essentially concurs.

Greater problems still arise in the case of new member states if one concentrates only on the direct impacts of the EU on party systems that occur through Euroscepticism and Eurosceptic parties. The first difficulty is that Euroscepticism and hostility to the EU are not always overt in the post-communist world, which makes them hard to measure. Parties that are verging on Europhobic in their attitudes to Euroatlantic integration may support EU membership at a declaratory level. Kopecký & Mudde (2002) labelled such parties 'Europragmatists', and included in this category are the Independent Smallholders' Party (FKGP) in Hungary and the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) in Slovakia. (Henderson 2008)

Secondly, during the recent accession process, the constraints the EU placed on parties and governments were much more prominent than in the case of existing member states from Western Europe, to the extent that they could – most particularly in the Slovak case – be considered rather direct impacts. In all accession states the European Commission's regular reports on each country's progress towards accession, with its systematic monitoring of the transposition and implementation of the *acquis*, placed a straightjacket on legislative programmes in some areas which was so clearly manifest that shrewd governments were able to blame the EU for unpopular measures that they would have had to introduce in any case. (Grabbe 2006; Schimmelfennig – Sedelmeier 2005) To this extent, the EU was directly shaping the political system on every level. For example, some parts of the *acquis* required laws on the civil service, or economic transparency, which restricted existing modes of

party patronage. While the limitation of political patronage has by no means eliminated party-led clientelism, institutional changes have nonetheless been long-term. (Scherpereel 2009)

Thirdly, Taggart and Szczerbiak (2001: 12) have suggested in their work comparing Euroscepticism in western and eastern Europe that 'the positions of parties in their party systems is related to the expression of Euroscepticism', and that this principle will apply in east central Europe as well as in the old member states. Yet the proposition needs some qualification. The assumption is that Eurosceptic or extremist parties will be peripheral to the party system because they are 'uncoalitionable' as partners in government, and that Euroscepticism is therefore 'a relatively costless stance' for them because they do not participate in government. However, in the early days of the accession process, when Romania and Slovakia submitted their applications to join the EU, both had small extremist parties in government (as well as leading government parties of dubious democratic integrity). The perception that they were hostile to the democratic values underlying European integration was not, for them, a costless stance after the accession process began in 1998: of all the parties concerned, only the Party of Social Democracy of Romania managed to return to power prior to EU accession. The EU had affected the coalition potential of individual parties and thereby also limited the possible permutations of government coalitions that could be constructed. Hence the contention that the EU can, in fact, lead to significant party system change at a national level.

This is not, however, a process that relates to party system change alone. While smaller, extremist parties are forced to the periphery of the system, a process of Europeanization takes place in larger parties. In recent years more attention in the Europeanization debate has focused on the effects such changes wield over domestic institutions and actors. (Cowles – Caporaso – Risse 2001; Hix – Goetz 2000) In the case of post-communist states, European institutions that were by the end of the millennium fairly well established are juxtaposed with insecure party systems, new institutional structures and weak economies. The potential for domestic Europeanization in Central and Eastern Europe has therefore been strong from the outset. In the case of parties aspiring to leading roles in the exercise of government power, they need for their survival as significant actors to adapt to the impact of European integration. This requires both programmatic and organizational change. The case of Slovakia in particular indicates that the EU may have an influence on national party systems, and Slovakia's largest party, the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), is an interesting illustration of rapid and enforced Europeanization, and the fact that this can be a hard adaptation to realise. Both the party's struggle to change and survive, and the reactions to that process by other party

actors, pointed to the substantial significance of the EU in the domestic politics of east central Europe.

Operationalizing ‘Europeanization’ of political parties in a new member state

On the basis of the previous discussion, it appears that there can be two differing approaches to analysing Europeanization of parties and party systems in a state such as Slovakia. Either one attempts to apply criteria painstakingly developed for measuring change in ‘old’ EU member states. Or one can attempt to suggest alternative frameworks for understanding the concept of Europeanization.

Current research on new member states is tending to adopt the former approach and apply categories suggested by Ladrech and others. This is a worthwhile exercise in comparative politics, but may prove problematic. Ladrech’s earlier work on Europeanization of political parties was further developed in a research project that looked at six west European case studies (Austria, UK, France, Germany, Spain and Sweden), but explicitly excluded new member states since they have not been ‘in a position to adapt their organizations over a significant the period in which European integration gradually increased’. (Poguntke et al. 2007: 17) The study looked at both formal change, such as *ex officio* seats for MEPs in national party executives, the rules for candidate selection for EP elections, and possible changes in the number of party staff specializing in EU affairs; and at informal change, such as change in the behaviour of actors within the parties. Its hypotheses were that ‘European integration has resulted in a shift of power within national political parties in favour of national party elites’, and that ‘European integration has resulted in a shift of power within national political parties in favour of EU specialists’. The problem is that, despite the rigorous nature of the research, they reach no firm conclusion, and at one point conclude that ‘change induced by European integration has been limited and patchy’. (Poguntke et al. 2007: 208)

In a sense, this presents a *carte blanche* for creating a new framework for suggesting what Europeanization means for party politics in new member states. Three initial propositions will be presented here.

Firstly, we can redefine what the EU means. The European Community was conceived originally as a project of economic and political integration. Put crudely, the right tended to like economic integration while the left liked political integration. So European integration offered something for everyone other than extremists: this was fundamental for the viability of the project. (Henderson 2001) For candidate states from the 1990s on, the EU also had an economic and a political dimension, the two first Copenhagen criteria.

Economic integration required marketisation and internationalisation, and was hence very similar to the post-communist economic reform project. Political integration required consolidation of democracy and democratic institutions, and was in line with the post-communist political reform project, but was distinctly different from the political integration programme that underlies the aspirations of old member states.

Crucially, however, in candidate states, both the political and economic reform projects linked to EU membership tended to be supported by the same end of the party spectrum. The parties that had trouble with the EU agenda politically because of nationalist or authoritarian tendencies generally also opposed transparent privatisation processes. They looked backward to the communist past rather than forward to Europe. Endorsing the EU accession aim therefore compelled them to reorientate.

This then leads to the first hypothesis of what Europeanization means for political parties in Central and Eastern Europe, which is that the EU can have an impact on party systems. It forces reform-hostile parties to change in order to achieve accession, and therefore affects their coalition potential. This hypothesis is supported by the Slovak case, since Mečiar's HZDS desperately tried to 'reinvent' itself from 2000 onwards as a party that would not prevent the achievement of EU accession. Having failed to gain government power despite being the single most successful party in the 1998 and 2002 elections, it strove to broaden its coalition potential. Its election manifestos now consistently emphasise its pro-EU orientation. This shift in its programmatic orientation has not, however, been notably accompanied by changes in its organization structure, and Mečiar remains the only constant in the top party leadership. Its attempts to reorient itself also appeared to be superficial when it finally reentered government in 2006, and again joined a government with the Slovak National Party. However, the inclusion of the Nationalists was largely the decision of the largest coalition partner, Smer-Social Democracy, which faced exclusion from the Party of European Socialists in the European Parliament. HZDS was clear that it would have been willing to form a coalition with any of the other parties elected. It also pursued its aims to join a transnational European party, and after the 2009 European Parliament election finally became a member of the European Democratic Party, which was the smaller partner in the parliament's liberal group.

'Europeanization' of party systems is not, therefore, merely a superficial and transitory phenomenon. Furthermore, in states that have yet to achieve EU accession, such as Serbia and Ukraine, orientation towards European integration has the potential to affect the structure of party competition. It should not be forgotten, however, that it is local political parties and well as EU conditionality who are the agents of Europeanization: part of the party

spectrum chooses to politicize the issue of achieving EU membership to their own advantage.

This leads to the second hypothesis, which is that in states which, like Slovakia, have had problems being accepted for accession negotiations, there may be replication of the situation that arose in Slovakia, where the major EU debate was about not what Slovak parties wanted from the EU in policy terms, or the sort of EU they wanted, but rather what the EU required from Slovakia and who could deliver it. (Henderson 2004) EU accession is a valence issue: it is accepted in political discourse as a 'good thing', and competence in achieving it is the contested political issue. However, the result of this is that governments and parties can be slow in developing complex policies on EU-related issues, and in adapting their formal internal structures to facilitate the formation and the successful assertion of preferred policy options. The Central and East European concept of Europeanization therefore impedes the development of processes that are measurable by the indicators formulated for judging Europeanization in 'old' member states. Membership when achieved is viewed instrumentally, largely in economic terms.

The third hypothesis is that in states with difficult accession trajectories, membership in transnational party organizations takes on a far greater significance than in other member states. Belonging is important, and can be less an instrument for augmenting influence on the international stage, and 'uploading' policy preferences into EU decision making, and more a device for positioning the party in domestic political competition. There is indeed some evidence of 'bad fit': parties may select transnational groups according to which one has a 'vacancy' for the country concerned, and sometimes end up swapping groups when they remanoeuvre themselves in domestic politics.

All three hypotheses suggest that, although 'Europeanization' can be more profound in post-communist states, and more far-reaching in its affects because of the strong, almost existential, imperative to achieve European integration, in fact the domestic political input to the Europeanization arenas is very strong.

Conclusion

How, then, should research on the Europeanization of political parties and party systems in Central and Eastern Europe proceed? One preliminary suggestion can be made. It may be more fruitful to begin not with west European literature on Europeanization, and how to measure it, but with the developing literature on the nature of party politics in post-communist states. The financial relationship between parties and the state (see, for example, Rybář 2006; O'Dwyer 2004) may be more fruitful in determining how party politics interacts with the EU level of decision making. The gravitation of certain political parties, when in government, towards ministries that dispose of

European funds would be an interesting subject for further research. The underlying dynamics of the interplay between political and economic power in post-communist states is fundamental to understanding, for example, how concepts such as Moravcsik's 'liberal intergovernmentalism' may be applied to new member states. A party's position in its domestic field determines how it may act at EU level.

Convergence should not, therefore, be assumed as a 'given' in research projects. Convergence can only be analyzed on the basis of a developed understanding of what is specific to party politics in Central and Eastern Europe. Examination of the impacts of the EU on national political parties is not only a relatively underdeveloped area in the study of the old member states, but it also faces new challenges in encompassing the rather different political context of the accession states. Existing literature on Europeanization and party politics in the old EU member states provides useful frameworks for examining developments in accession states such as Slovakia, but modifications are required in order to encompass the complex dynamics of change in post-communist accession countries. Comparative case studies of individual EU member states are always complicated by national contexts, but since the 2004 enlargement, research design has to cater for far greater variation, including the specifics of post-communist political and economic development and the after-effects of the exceptionally strong constraints of conditionality during the accession period.

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