

Between Milieu and Vacuum

Organizational, Programmatic, and Electoral Strategies of the Former Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) and the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) Reexamined*

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Abstract

This paper proposes an updated approach to explaining two outcomes unforeseen by the existing comparative literature on post-communist successor parties: 1) the electoral stabilization (and even growth) and 2) the divergent developments of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS; later DIE LINKE) in Germany and the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM). The paper proceeds by integrating a critical reexamination of earlier studies' organizational and programmatic explanations of electoral success with an analysis of the party-system level of government-opposition signaling and positioning *vis-à-vis* other parties, which can be expected to take on heightened importance in 'third-generation elections.' It is argued that both parties' successes were tied to a strategic orientation toward going beyond their confinement in a delimited electoral 'milieu' and occupying a wider electoral 'vacuum' to the left of their Social Democratic competitors, albeit with early programmatic modernization and delayed organizational centralization in the PDS as opposed to a near-total continuity of programmatic non-reform and decentralized organization in the KSČM. The findings suggest that earlier studies specifically overlook the impact of subsequent ('third-generation') iterations of party competition on successor-party success as well as the mediation of organizational and programmatic factors by the party-system level.

Keywords: Czech Republic; electoral politics; Germany; party system; post-communist successor parties

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1. Introduction

How is it that the two parties long deemed in comparative studies of post-communist successor parties¹ to be structurally incapable of ideological reform and electoral success – namely, the then Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS; now DIE LINKE) and the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) – have attained an unforeseen degree of electoral stability, even constituting the largest parties of parliamentary opposition ahead of elections in both countries in 2017? How is it that the two parties grouped together into a ‘socialist-orthodox’ (Kitschelt 2002) successor-party type characterized by a strategy of ‘leftist retreat’ (Ziblatt, Biziouras 2002) subsequently diverged in their developments to such an extent that they are now rarely considered in comparison?² Hovering over this line of inquiry is the wider meta-question of where the previous literature, which was able to produce empirically plausible claims for a time, ‘went wrong’ and what an updated analysis of the PDS and KSČM might contribute toward answering it. This paper proceeds twofold by reexamining earlier comparative studies’ claims about the organizational and programmatic developments of both parties and proposing the incorporation of the party-system level of government-opposition signaling and positioning *vis-à-vis* other parties as a missing analytical component as well as ‘third-generation elections’ (Pop-Eleches 2010) as a temporal marker for the heightened importance of the latter. It is argued that the electoral successes of both the PDS and KSČM were tied to a strategic orientation on the party-system level toward going beyond a stable electoral ‘milieu’ and occupying the ‘vacuum’ to the left of their rightward-drifting Social Democratic competitors.³ Yet the ‘vacuum’ strategy was compatible with different organizational and programmatic developmental paths: while both parties oriented their programmatic strategies (in addition to their electoral campaign signaling) toward a left-wing oppositional stance along the salient socio-economic conflict dimension, the PDS also pursued early programmatic reform away from communist ideology (albeit not in the direction of ‘social-democratization’ (Waller 1995)) and saw a delayed onset of organizational centralization that enabled its westward expansion via the 2005 alliance with the WASG.

What first follows is an overview of the comparative successor-party literature tied to an argument for incorporating the party-system level into the analysis. This is followed by the case analyses of the PDS and KSČM, which are subdivided chronologically for purposes of presentation and draw extensively on primary texts and secondary analyses alike. The conclusion provides a holistic summary and a brief outlook on the election year 2017.

2. Theory and Methods

2.1. The Comparative Successor-Party Literature

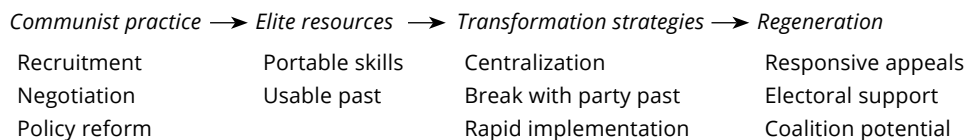
In the late 1990s and early 2000s – after at least two post-communist election cycles had taken place in most East-Central European countries – a body of literature in comparative

politics emerged around the question of the varying degrees of electoral success of post-communist successor parties. A number of influential studies converged in the conclusion that *a high degree of early programmatic modernization or 'social-democratization' as well as organizational centralization* led to a high degree of electoral success, for which the Social Democracy of the Republic of Poland (SdRP) – and later the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) – as well as the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSzP), which headed governments after winning parliamentary elections in 1993/2001 and 1994/2002, respectively, were cases in point. At the other extreme, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) in Germany and the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM), which hovered around the 5% threshold and the 10% mark, respectively, in national-level elections up to the early 2000s, were deemed exemplars of ideologically unreformed, electorally unsuccessful successor parties consistently ruled out of governing coalitions by other parties at the national level.

Orenstein (1998: 473–74) was perhaps the first to propose an overarching framework that analyzed the electoral success of successor parties in the four Visegrád countries as the function of 1) programmatic commitment to market-friendly reforms and the goal of EU accession and 2) 'strong institutionalized links with trade unions, nomenklatura business elites, and other economically based interest groups.' He thus argued with reference to the 'political opportunity structure of transition' that successor parties stood a chance of succeeding in the post-communist environment only if they catered to the high demand in the electorate for a path to European integration as well as the interests of organized interest groups in the still developing intermediary sector of the political system. This required that the former communist parties undergo far-reaching *programmatic change* according to the Western European social-democratic norm (acceptance of the market economy, liberal-democratic norms, and European integration) – a process also referred to as 'social-democratization' (Waller 1995) – as well as *organizational change* through an opening up to economically relevant interest groups.

Grzymała-Busse (2002), in her influential study, put forth a more systematic causal explanation by attributing the electoral success of the Polish and Hungarian successor parties to early and rapid processes of organizational centralization that in turn enabled reform-oriented party leaderships to carry out far-reaching programmatic modernization. These processes, however, were only possible (and the party leadership 'reform-oriented') in the first place because the former ruling-party elites in these countries could draw on 'usable' elements of the regime past – most importantly, their experiences with interest mediation *vis-à-vis* non-regime actor groups. Grzymała-Busse thus introduced *regime type*

Figure 1: Determinants of the 'regeneration' of post-communist successor parties



Source: Grzymała-Busse (2002: 9).

as a factor into the successor-party success equation: the Polish and Hungarian successor parties ultimately owed their success to the relatively open ruling style of their predecessor parties, which left behind 'elite resources' in the form of 'portable skills' in dealing with organized interests as well as reform-oriented party elites willing to use them to adapt their parties organizationally and programmatically to the new environment. In contrast, the more closed and authoritarian regime in Czechoslovakia with its greater degree of state and party penetration into civil organizations meant that the successor parties there lacked these elites and elite resources.

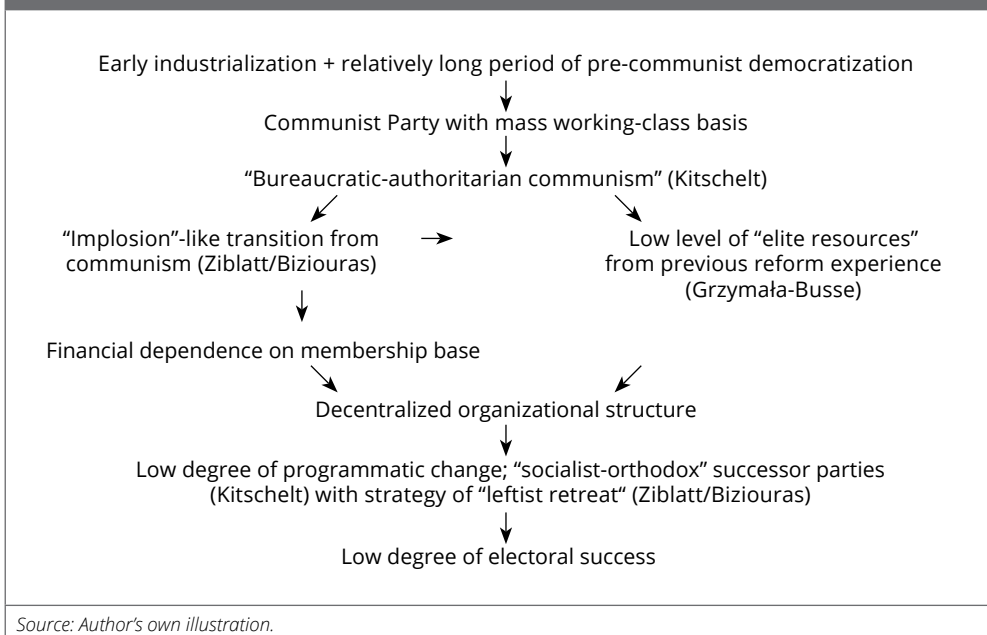
The causal chain did not have to end there, however: Kitschelt (2002) proposed an expanded account of 'Regime Legacies as Causal Argument', arguing not only that communist regime type (*national-accommodative, bureaucratic-authoritarian, or neo-patrimonial*) explained the developmental paths of the successor parties, but also that regime type was itself determined by the timing and duration of industrialization and democratization in these countries. In a comparative framework encompassing 24 post-communist countries, Kitschelt classified East Germany and Czechoslovakia as (the only two) bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes, in which highly organized mass communist parties that had emerged as a result of early industrialization and interwar experiences with democratic political competition could resort to a high level of systematic repression against already organized political opponents. This regime legacy, in turn, gave rise to ideologically unreformed, 'ghetto'-like successor parties with relatively large, active, tightly-knit membership bases (and high member-voter ratios), but also low shares of the national vote compared to their counterparts in Poland and Hungary, where late industrialization produced relatively weak communist parties that depended on some degree of compromise and openness in their rule – giving rise, in turn, to adaptive, ideologically reformed, electorally successful successor parties.

Ziblatt and Biziouras (2002), on the other hand, singled out the *mode of transition from communism* as the key causal factor behind the degree of ideological change and, by extension, the electoral success of successor parties. They argued that in East Germany and Czechoslovakia, the 'implosion' of the old regime meant that successor parties could salvage only a small portion of ruling-party assets and thus became financially dependent on membership dues, leading in turn to decentralized organizational structures with strong local and regional units preventing reform-oriented elements of the party leadership from imposing programmatic change on a largely anti-reform membership base. In Poland and Hungary, by contrast, the relatively negotiated nature of the transition meant that the successor parties could maintain a greater share of regime assets and use their role in the designing of the new political system to back the adoption of systems of public funding of political parties that freed them from financial dependence on their own memberships (an application of Katz and Mair's (1995) cartel party thesis to post-communist countries).

All of these approaches had in common a path-dependent logic that sought to explain differences in the electoral success of successor parties as a result of organizational and programmatic evolutions that may, in turn, be determined by more or less long-term historical factors. This literature, then – notwithstanding the differences across individual studies with respect to causal mechanisms and the length of the causal chain – converged in the

conclusion that the PDS and KSČM were *structurally incapable of reform and, by extension, of the electoral success* of the levels of their Polish and Hungarian successor-party counterparts. The title of Ziblatt and Biziouras's 2002 study, 'Doomed to be Radicals?', was telling in this regard. Figure 2 roughly presents the aggregate state of research up to the early 2000s based on the above-cited (and arguably most influential) studies.

Figure 2: Extended causal chain of the degree of electoral success of the East German and Czech successor parties



This conclusion, however, became empirically problematic in light of developments starting in the mid-2000s. The then-ruling SLD and MSzP suffered dramatic electoral collapses in 2005 and 2010, respectively, from which they have never recovered.⁴ The PDS and KSČM, on the other hand, can be said to have stabilized electorally – with peaks of 11.9% and 18.5%, respectively – and established themselves in their respective party systems, even holding at the time of writing the status of largest opposition party in parliament. Moreover, the founding of DIE LINKE out of the PDS-WASG merger in 2007 has given rise to a new formation that resists straightforward classification as a (at best 'second-order') successor party, let alone an 'unreformed' one.⁵ There is, then, a twofold explanatory deficit as to 1) how the PDS and KSČM have attained greater levels of electoral success (even greater than their Polish counterpart) than envisaged by the previous literature and 2) how these two parties, classified into the same successor-party type in earlier studies, have diverged in their (organizational and programmatic) trajectories.

2.2. The Party System as Explanatory Dimension

A number of *a priori* reasons speak for integrating the party-system level into the analysis of successor-party electoral success. One reason lies in the unique status of East Germany in any comparative literature on post-communism: namely, the coupling of its transition from communism with its incorporation into an already existing (non-post-communist) state. For the ‘constraints and opportunities in the strategic conduct of post-communist successor parties’ (Kitschelt 2002), this has obviously important implications: the PDS, as the successor party in the ex-GDR, found itself inserted into a party-system context in which it faced established competitors (indeed, as the only major newcomer) and was subject to rules applicable to the entire Federal Republic – most importantly, the 5% threshold for proportional representation in the Bundestag, which was applied nationwide with the exception of the first post-unification election of 1990. The latter constraint, in particular, meant that the PDS could not afford to remain a ‘regional milieu party’ if it was to survive and was even, in a sense, ‘doomed to reform’ (to rephrase Ziblatt and Bizziouras).

A second reason can be located in Kitschelt’s own work on the formation of post-communist party systems: parallel to his analysis of the development of successor parties – and applying a similar logic to Lipset and Rokkan’s (1967) theory of cleavage formation in Western Europe – Kitschelt (1995) attributed differences in the degree and nature of ‘programmatic structuration’ in post-communist party systems to the timing and duration of industrialization and democratization (‘system time’), connected by the causal links *regime type*, *mode of transition*, and *post-communist institutional design*. Notably, he assigned the highest values on the ‘Index of the chances of programme-based party formation’ to the Czech Republic and East Germany (7.5 and 7.0, respectively), where early industrialization and the relatively long duration of interwar democracy could be expected to lead to the dominance of a ‘socio-economic cleavage’ around ‘questions of property and distribution.’ In Poland and Hungary, by contrast, late industrialization and short-lived interwar democratization were expected to lead not only to a lower degree of overall programmatic structuration, but also to cross-cutting socio-economic and socio-cultural conflict dimensions.

While Kitschelt’s framework was of a strictly prognostic character and can be criticized for excessive causal depth, the key point here is that the party-system level is already immanently present in one prominent path-dependent approach to successor-party success. Therefore, a causal explanation of successor-party development based on long-term historical factors going back to industrialization and democratization cannot factor out, at least not in the East German and Czech cases, the relevance of programmatically structured party interactions generated by the same causal mechanisms. Moreover, it is worth noting how Kitschelt (1995: 452) defines these interactions: ‘Party competition is an iterative ‘signalling game’ in which voters and parties learn about each other’s ‘type’ through signals (...) and develop reputations on which they act.’ This accounts for the higher degree of programmatic structuration in post-communist countries with longer experiences of democracy, but also the generally lower degree of programmatic structuration in post-communist countries compared to established Western European democracies, where parties can draw on ‘reputations’ developed over decades of iterative signaling and the resulting

party-voter linkages. It has been noted that post-communist elections display characteristics such as high electoral volatility (Casal Bértoa 2014), ‘anti-incumbency bias’ (Pop-Eleches 2010), and even ‘hyperaccountability’ (Roberts 2008); in this context, ‘third-generation elections’, which take place after two different party camps have alternated in government, may heighten the electoral potential of ‘unorthodox parties’ as voters increasingly turn to alternatives untainted by prior incumbency (Pop-Eleches 2010). One possible implication of all this for the ‘constraints and opportunities in the strategic conduct of post-communist successor parties’ is that government participation, in post-communist contexts in general, constitutes a particular ‘constraint’ (for parties of government) or ‘opportunity’ (for parties of opposition). Thus, the ‘iterative signaling game’ of party competition may be expected to influence the electoral success of successor parties in terms of not only party-system cleavages, but also government-opposition signaling, i.e. whether parties position themselves in association with the incumbent government or against it. As the following analysis will attempt to show, the electoral success of the PDS and KSČM is inextricably linked to consistent positioning along the highly salient socio-economic conflict dimension and in opposition to Social-Democratic-led governments, but not to organizational or programmatic change alone.⁶

3. The PDS: From ‘Regional Milieu Party’ to ‘The Left’

3.1. 1989–1995

In line with the ‘implosion’ thesis (Ziblatt, Bizziouras 2002), the PDS was the product of a hastily organized Extraordinary Congress, held in December 1989 after the collapse of the regime had become all but certain following the fall of the Berlin Wall, in which the ruling party was renamed SED-PDS (Socialist Unity Party of Germany – Party of Democratic Socialism) and a reform-oriented party executive was elected with Gregor Gysi as chairman. The executive signaled its intentions by shortening the party name to ‘PDS’ in February 1990, citing the need to ‘separate in name, as in all other areas, from the SED’ (Neugebauer, Stöss 1996: 41). The February 1990 party congress adopted a basic program, which made an abstract commitment to ‘socialism as expression of age-old ideals of humanity’ and held out for the further development of the GDR away from the ‘centralist-administrative socialism type’ (PDS 1990a), and a statute that granted party members the right to form ‘interest groups and working groups for the representation of special interests (...) within the party’ and state-level branches of the party the autonomy to ‘represent the party in the democratic life of the territory and [to] develop their own conceptions and initiatives on all questions of society (...)’ (PDS 1990b). This ‘founding compromise’ (Brie M. 2000: 30–31) provided for a decentralized organizational framework in which anti-reform elements within the membership, such as the Communist Platform (KPF), could freely organize, but the reform-oriented leadership could use its ‘steering’ (Brie 1995: 9) function to push through programmatic modernization within the parameters of a broad commitment to socialism. Under the tutelage of André Brie as head of the program commission, the PDS’s programs combined

a defense of eastern German interests with a 'modern' democratic socialism that sought to appeal to a left-libertarian electorate rooted in the west; the 1990 election program declared opposition 'to the hitherto known 'real socialism' in the east and to the capitalist societies of the west' under a wide range of headings such as 'demilitarization', 'rights of foreigners', 'a self-determined woman life', and 'a fundamental ecological turn' (PDS 1990c). The basic program of 1993, which replaced that of 1990, saw a further elaboration of the 'transformation' paradigm that called for a 'radical democratization' of economy and society, underscoring the party's aspiration 'to operate in all of Germany' with its members engaging 'in democratic, social and political movements: in the trade unions and workplaces, in the women's movement, (...) in unemployed initiatives, tenant and consumer associations, environmental and Third-World groups', all while vehemently rejecting a 'westernization of the east' (PDS 1993).

The divisions between the reform-oriented leadership and anti-reform elements of the membership surfaced in the run-up to the 1994 Bundestag election as Gysi's (1994) Ingolstadt Manifesto attracted criticism of its call for a 'new social contract' as a renunciation of the language of class struggle.⁷ Yet with the 1994 election being the biggest test of the party's survival – the 5% threshold now being applied to the entire Federal Republic and not separately for east and west as in 1990 – the party leadership could use 'the disciplining fear in the party of the disappearance of the PDS from the political landscape' to maintain unity in the electoral campaign (Neugebauer, Stöss 1996: 67). Following the party's successful return to the Bundestag, however, controversy reemerged with the party executive's '10 theses on the further path of the PDS', which reiterated Gysi's call for a 'new social contract' and even identified the PDS as a factor 'for a political change and reform majority', thus hinting at increased cooperation with the SPD and Greens against the reduced center-right majority in the Bundestag (Parteivorstand der PDS 1994). This time, the ensuing debates and criticisms at the January 1995 party congress produced a compromise resolution in lieu of the '10 Theses', reaffirming the PDS's 'principled opposition to the ruling societal conditions' (PDS 1995).

Michael Brie (1995: 9–11) interpreted the January 1995 congress as the end of the 'uncontested hegemony' of the Gysi-Brie-Bisky leadership, characterized by 'the typical construction of the successor organization of a former state party: a very active reform group dominates a rather passive membership committed to the traditions of monolithic unity.' In other words, the congress delegates' revolt against the '10 Theses' put an end to hopes for a top-down social-democratization of the PDS along Polish or Hungarian lines – that is, if this had ever been the intention. Indeed, the PDS had sought to present itself from early on as a 'modern socialist party [that] has mastery of the topics of modernity' (Neugebauer, Stöss 1996: 103), presenting a broad palette of democratizing, environmentalist, and civil-libertarian demands and demarcating itself from both state socialism and social democracy. At the same time, a dichotomy of a reformist leadership pitted against an anti-reform membership base would be far too simplistic: party programs had the backing of broad majorities at party congresses, including the 1993 basic program (468 in favor, 16 against, 14 abstentions). The program commission, in turn, proactively sought to include a wide spectrum of party members in programmatic work and to bridge differences through compromise: André Brie (1993) noted that the 1993 program was only made possible by

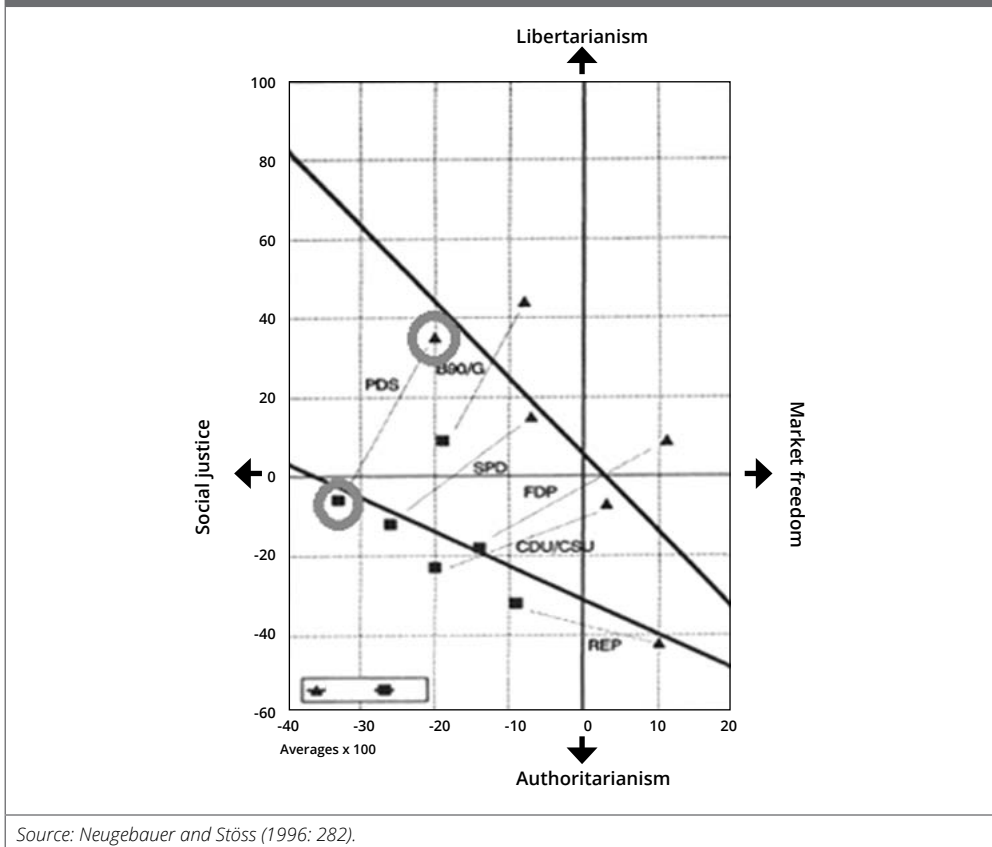
the willingness ‘to bring together different positions, to not rarely make compromises, to express differences in opinion or (...) to cover up concrete differences with fairly general formulations.’ It was when the party executive was perceived to overstep the bounds of the ‘founding compromise’ – especially with controversial terminology such as ‘new social contract’ and ‘reform majority’ – that it brought wider sections of the membership against it; tellingly, the KPF recurrently appealed to the party’s ‘pluralism’ in its programmatic criticisms (Benjamin 1995). At no point was the democratic socialist self-understanding of the party contested by either side, as even the ‘10 Theses’ affirmed (‘Socialism remains for the PDS an indispensable goal’).

The PDS’s strategic orientation as an all-German socialist party appealing both to eastern interests and a wider left-libertarian electorate rooted in social movements and civil society was reflected not only in its programmatic direction, but also in its organizational adjustments. In October 1990, the PDS (1990c) congress adopted a resolution on the creation of PDS state-level branches in the west as well as participation in the upcoming Bundestag election with open lists allowing for ‘independent leftists’ to stand for the party. The amended party statute of 1991 also solicited the participation of left-wing activists with radical provisions for their autonomous participation as non-members without many of the costs (e.g. financial) associated with party membership: ‘Non-members who are interested in the projects of the party (sympathizers) can take part in structures and associations within the party (...) can be elected by organizations and associations of the PDS to delegate conferences, including the party congress’ (PDS 1991).

An analysis of the PDS’s voter-structural positioning in the party system at this stage makes clear why the party pursued this two-pronged strategy of eastern rootedness and westward expansion early on. To begin with, the PDS’s electorate was heavily concentrated in the east: in the 1990 Bundestag election, the party received 11.1% of the vote in the eastern states (and 24.8% in East Berlin, higher than in any state) and a puny 0.3% in the western states; in the 1994 Bundestag election, it won 19.8% in the east (34.2% in East Berlin) and 0.9% in the west (Neugebauer, Stöss 1996: 180–84; 226–28). As previously noted, the 5% threshold was applied nationwide starting in the 1994 election, forcing the PDS to improve its share of the vote in the west in order to secure its parliamentary survival. While the high concentration of the party’s support among eastern civil servants (34.6% in 1994) and employees (26.3%), with below-average support among workers and self-employed, suggested the thesis of the PDS as the ‘party of the fallen elites’, Klein and Caballero (1996) showed that left-wing ideology, measured by voters’ self-placement on a left-right scale, was the single most important determinant of the PDS vote in the 1994 election. Neugebauer and Stöss (1996: 282), on the basis of voter attitude surveys and a two-dimensional model of the German party system, located the PDS electorate as closest (among the electorates of all parties) to the ‘social justice’ pole of the socio-economic conflict dimension and near the center of the socio-cultural (‘libertarian’ vs. ‘authoritarian’) conflict dimension. While their analysis showed an east-west gap within the PDS electorate – with the few PDS voters in the west considerably more libertarian and somewhat less ‘social justice’-oriented than their eastern counterparts (see figure 3) – it also showed a remarkable similarity in the PDS electorate’s relative positioning *vis-à-vis* those of other parties in east and west: PDS voters in both areas were by far the most ‘social justice’-oriented and second only to the Greens’ in

their libertarianism. All this can be seen as a confirmation of the party's strategic coupling of westward electoral expansion with left-libertarian appeals as well as emphasis on left-wing ideology as the common denominator across east and west.

Figure 3: The positioning of the PDS electorate in the German party system, 1994



Source: Neugebauer and Stöss (1996: 282).

Yet there was a clear discrepancy between the PDS's aspired status of an all-German socialist party rooted in 'democratic, social and political movements' and its empirical reality as a party heavily concentrated in the east. Neugebauer and Stöss (1996: 284) concluded that the PDS constituted a 'regional milieu party', characterizing its electorate's negative attitudes toward both market liberalism and an all-German identity as 'anti-western': 'The PDS represents a delimited and by now quite stable milieu that does not want to integrate mentally into the order of the Federal Republic.' Indeed, the left-wing ideology that Klein and Caballero identified as the most important determinant of the PDS vote in 1994 overlapped with a number of other indicators: Falter and Klein (1994) saw in the combination of high level of education, strong identification with socialism, and strong feeling of social disadvantage a 'mixture of ideology, nostalgia and protest'; Niedermayer (1998) analyzed the PDS as representing a center-periphery conflict in the party system based on attitudes

shared by a majority of PDS voters (and in much higher proportion than the rest of the eastern German population) specifically tied to conditions in the east; Klein and Caballero (1996) found a strong correlation between left-wing ideology and membership in the GDR civil service. In short, the PDS electorate was indeed defined by left-wing ideology, but within the confines of a heavy concentration in the east and on eastern issues.

3.2. 1995–2004

The 1998 Bundestag election made clear that the PDS was orienting its electoral strategy toward the ‘vacuum thesis’ (Neugebauer, Stöss 1996): with the SPD under Gerhard Schröder presenting itself as the ‘new center’ (*Neue Mitte*) in anticipation of forming the next government in coalition with the Greens, the PDS presented itself in the electoral campaign as the only real party of opposition and of the left, with slogans such as ‘This country needs a different chancellor. But even more important – a different politics’ and ‘Without the PDS there would be no pressure from the left, no socialist opposition in the Bundestag.’ Programmatically, the party once again underscored its self-understanding as defender of eastern interests with the Rostock Manifesto of April 1998, in which leading PDS politicians called for a number of institutional and socio-economic measures to secure the ‘self-determination of the new federal states (...) property formation and property protection in eastern Germany (...) release of the eastern German economic, social and cultural potential’ (Luft et al. 1998); the party’s election program proposed further measures aimed at ‘social justice’, such as a radically progressive tax reform and a one-off capital levy on banks and ‘larger private assets’ (PDS 1998). The key change, then, was one of signaling with respect to the question of government or opposition; as an internal pre-election strategy paper in the PDS Bundestag group noted: given that ‘a red-green majority on its own in Bonn is likely (...) what is at stake is (...) a power-political clarification. At the federal level, the PDS stands for a clear left-wing opposition that will exert pressure on Kohl light (Schröder) and governmental adaptations (Greens) in the event of a change of government’ (Keller 1998).

In the 1998 election, the PDS attained its then-best result of 5.1% nationwide, with 21.6% in the east (1994: 19.8%) and 1.2% in the west (1994: 0.9%); 67% of its increase in the vote share came from those who had voted SPD in 1994 (Neugebauer, Stöss 1998: 130–132). Thus, the goal of westward expansion failed once again but the ‘vacuum’ strategy was partly successful, mainly in the east, where the PDS indeed managed to slightly improve its share among workers (17% from 15%), while losing massively among civil servants (15% from 35%) (Neugebauer, Stöss 1998: 131–135). Yet the party’s success in reaching the symbolically significant 5% mark and in making incremental gains in both east and west led to an unprecedented sense of complacency about its immediate political survival: André Brie (2000: 25–26) wrote that the PDS is ‘capable’, in western Germany, ‘of continuing and possibly even accelerating its upward trend at a low level and receiving some 2% of the western German votes in 2002’ while, at the same time, ‘preserving its eastern German strength and responsibility.’ The assumption that the PDS’s immediate future was secure thanks to the combination of rootedness in an eastern ‘milieu’ and gradual encroachment into the Social Democratic ‘vacuum’ was one shared by a number of analysts: Hough (2000:

126), who defined the PDS as a *'de facto regionalist party'*, concluded that *'it would appear that for as long as the PDS mobilises feelings of eastern German uniqueness, it will have a future within the German political system'*; Neller and Thaidigsmann (2002: 441) held that *'through the legitimate input of political, especially democratic and social orientations and values developed against the background of socialization and life in the GDR (...) the party has established itself as representative of eastern German interests and will not leave the political stage any time soon.'*

In the 2002 Bundestag election, however, the PDS recorded its worst result, its 4.0% of the vote and two constituency seats falling short of the threshold for proportional representation; it received 16.9% in the east – a severe drop from 1998 – and 1.1% in the west. This time, the key organizational change had been the resignations of Lothar Bisky as chairman and of Gregor Gysi from all offices following his involvement in the *'bonus miles'* scandal as Business Senator in the SPD-PDS state-level coalition in Berlin. The election of Gabi Zimmer, the preferred candidate of the powerful eastern state-level branches and not of the party executive, as Bisky's successor in 2000 had reflected an overall weakening of the federal executive *vis-à-vis* the state level (Hough, Koß 2009). Programmatically, there was no significant change, but also a noticeable absence of new policy concepts in the *'social justice'* sphere (unlike in the previous two elections) and an increased focus on peace issues in the wake of the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. In short, the PDS failed to maintain an *'attractive personnel and programmatic offering'* to voters (Neugebauer, Stöss 2003: 128). André Brie (2000: 26) was thus remarkably prescient in noting in his above-cited paper that the *'main problem of the PDS will be its ability to mobilize [its voter] potential in the 2002 election campaign and, if applicable, to compensate for Gysi's complete withdrawal.'*

At the party-system level, the key problem for the PDS in the 2002 election was one of coalition signaling: in a two-horse race with CDU/CSU and FDP polling ahead of SPD and Greens for most of the campaign, the PDS sent confusing signals with slogans such as *'Whoever wants to prevent Stoiber [CDU/CSU candidate for chancellor] must vote PDS'*, rendering it unclear to its supporters *'how Stoiber could be prevented and the re-entry of the PDS into the Bundestag secured at the same time'* (Neugebauer, Stöss 2003: 144). One result of this was massive ballot-splitting, especially in the east: some 23% (and 18% in the east) of those who gave their list votes to the PDS gave their constituency votes to the SPD, while about 25% of PDS constituency voters voted for SPD lists; in a kind of reverse *'vacuum'*, the PDS lost about 300,000 of its 1998 votes in the east alone to the SPD (Neugebauer, Stöss 2003: 144–146).⁸

In the aftermath of the 2002 defeat, the PDS embarked on what may be termed a delayed onset of organizational centralization; just as the party executive had taken on a *"top-down steering"* (Brie 1995: 9) function in the times of *'existential fear'* (Neugebauer, Stöss 1996: 67) in the early 1990s, it was now asked to re-assume a leading role. The October 2002 party congress adopted a resolution along these lines: *'The party executive is the leading political organ. It also has the responsibility of overcoming its severe leadership deficits in strategic questions, in important policy areas, in the opening up of the party to other democratic forces, and in the mobilization of the members'* (PDS 2002). The June 2003 party congress went on: *'[W]e want a party executive that politically coordinates, strategically orients, and organizationally leads these activities as collective body'* (PDS 2003a). In March 2003, the

executive initiated preparations for a new basic program; at the June congress, Lothar Bisky returned as party chairman and proceeded to fill the executive with his preferred personnel (Micus 2007). The new basic program of the PDS (2003b), which featured little change and a few new concepts such as ‘democratization of the commune’, had already been adopted at the October 2003 congress by a large majority (333-38-10). Especially in the context of a ‘neoliberal offensive’ under an SPD-Green government, a social-democratization of the PDS was not in the cards; Benjamin Immanuel-Hoff of the party’s reformist wing even rejected the notion of a ‘Bad Godesberg of the PDS’ in his congress speech (Kablow et al. 2003).

Apart from the congress-sanctioned strengthening of the executive under the previous longtime chairman, one key organizational change was the tighter integration of the federal and state-level leaderships through the ‘parliamentary group chairs’ conference’ (*Fraktionsvorsitzendenkonferenz*), which was first convened by the party executive in August 2003 and brought together the chairs and managing directors of the six state-level PDS parliamentary groups and the two remaining PDS MPs in the Bundestag (Hough, Koß 2009: 589). Paradoxically, therefore, the PDS’s loss of the bulk of its Bundestag MPs enabled the creation of a single coordinating body representing the ‘party in public office’ at the highest level – something that had not been possible previously due to ‘the organizational (i.e. financial) imbalance between the party in central office and the party in public office’ (Hough, Koß: 586) as well as the ‘unique political role of the Bundestag group *vis-à-vis* the leadership of the party as a whole’, which had made difficult ‘the formation of a political center of the party’ (Neugebauer, Stöss 1999: 120). In the aftermath of the 2002 election, then, this political center finally began to take shape.

3.3. 2004–2007

The PDS’s long-awaited breakthrough westward and into the Social Democratic ‘vacuum’ through cooperation with the WASG in the 2005 Bundestag election and the 2007 merger was ultimately enabled by – and itself characterized by – the belated consolidation of an organizational center (Micus 2007). The WASG, formed as an initiative of mostly (ex-) SPD members and trade unionists against the neo-liberal course of the Schröder government and constituted as a party in July 2005, initially maintained considerable distance to the PDS and independently contested the May 2005 state election in North Rhine Westphalia (NRW) (Nachtwey 2007; Ernst et al. 2012). After this election, however, in which the WASG won 2.2% of the vote and the PDS a mere 0.9%, things went quickly: the same night, Schröder announced early elections for September to seek a fresh mandate for his reform agenda, leaving the cash-strapped and fledgling WASG and a PDS that had spectacularly failed in its latest attempt at westward expansion facing an extremely short timeframe for organizing their election campaigns. The next day (May 23), former SPD chairman Oskar Lafontaine, who had resigned as Finance Minister after a falling-out with Schröder in 1999, announced his departure from the SPD and publicly called for a PDS-WASG alliance for the upcoming election. A series of high-level meetings followed in descending hierarchical order, beginning with Lafontaine and Gysi, who met on May 24 and agreed on a plan of

action that was passed onto Bisky, who passed it on ‘almost in an ultimatum-like manner’ to the PDS executive (Neugebauer, Stöss 2008: 156–157). The party executive then announced formal negotiations with the WASG, which began on May 30 with representatives of the executives of both parties (Hübner, Strohschneider 2007; Heunemann 2008).

The dynamic, then, was clear: the party executive was the driver of and virtually the lone decision-making body throughout the negotiation process, with the party congress only coming into play in the form of an Extraordinary Congress on July 17. The negotiations produced a quick agreement on the model of joint candidacies on the open lists of the PDS (which had been practiced since 1990) but were more protracted regarding a change of party name for the election; Bisky initially pushed through his proposal ‘Democratic Left – PDS’ within the executive against internal resistance, before skepticism from the WASG led to the compromise solution of ‘The Left Party’ with ‘PDS’ as an optional addendum for state-level branches to decide on (Hübner, Strohschneider 2007). The Extraordinary Congress of July 17 merely ratified this change. The post-election merger negotiations, too, were closely coordinated on the PDS side by a central ‘Steering Group’ staffed by members of the party executive as well as the executive of the newly elected LINKE parliamentary group in the Bundestag. The latter developed into the ‘spearhead of the merger process and into a weighty argument of the protagonists of a united party’ (Micus 2007: 210); the new party, in effect, had already come into existence as ‘party in public office’ after the 2005 election, before the ‘party in central office’ and – with even more of a time lag, as pointed out in recent criticisms (Mattuschek et al. 2013) – the ‘party on the ground’ took shape after the 2007 merger.

In the 2005 election, The Left Party.PDS won 8.7% of the vote nationwide, with 25.3% in the east and 4.9% in the west, returning 54 MPs (12 of them from the WASG). The party made significant inroads into the Social Democratic ‘vacuum’, receiving higher and above-average shares of the vote among workers, the unemployed, trade-union members, and persons with low education levels; one post-election study identified a category of ‘modernization losers’ – encompassing workers, the unemployed, low-level employees, and low-level civil servants – of whom 23% in the west and 19% in the east voted for The Left Party.PDS (Niedermayer 2006). The high vote levels among ‘resource-weak persons’ (Niedermayer 2009) in the west in particular led Niedermayer (2006: 529) to conclude that ‘a social-structural change with ideological positioning remaining the same’ had taken place in the party’s electorate; left-wing ideological self-positioning remained high at 75% in the east and 92% in the west. An analysis of The Left Party.PDS’s voter-structural positioning in the two-dimensional structure of the party system showed remarkable similarities to Neugebauer and Stöss’s findings for 1994: the party’s electorate was located closer to the ‘welfare-state interventionism’ pole of the socio-economic cleavage dimension than that of any other party and second only to the Greens’ in its proximity to the ‘multiculturality’ pole of the socio-cultural dimension, with its western voters somewhat less welfare-state interventionist and somewhat more pro-multiculturality than their eastern counterparts (see figures 4 and 5).

If the pre-2005 PDS could be defined in terms of a ‘socio-economic cleavage of transformation’, with its electorate defined primarily by left-wing (socio-economic) positioning coupled with an eastern concentration that yielded a specific set of attitudes that Neugebauer

Figure 4: The positioning of The Left Party.PDS electorate along the socio-economic conflict dimension of the German party system, 2005

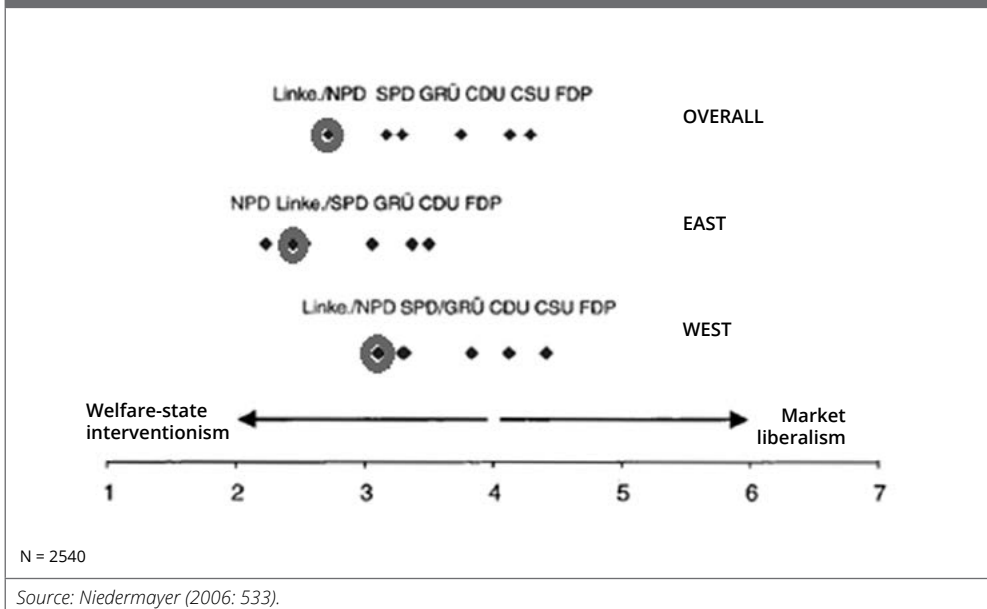
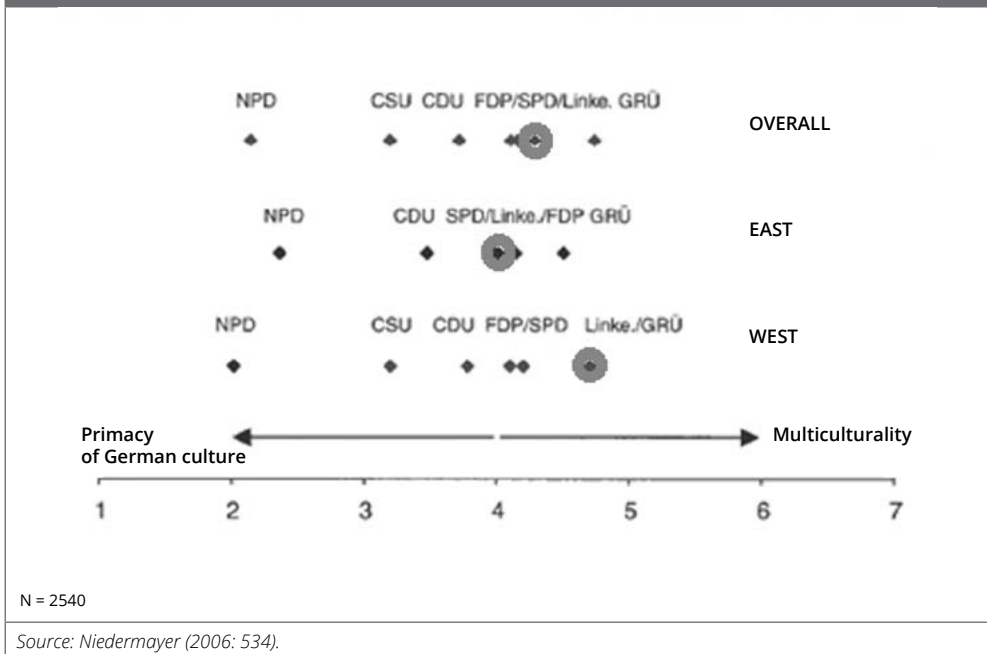


Figure 5: The positioning of The Left Party.PDS electorate along the socio-cultural conflict dimension of the German party system, 2005



and Stöss had termed ‘anti-western’, the 2005 election suggested a shift toward a nationwide socio-economic conflict dimension with not only a less lopsided voter concentration in the east, but also a more common set of salient issues introduced by the SPD-Green government’s reform agenda. One indication of this was the remarkable similarity in eastern and western Left Party.PDS voters’ identification of the most important issues in the election: 60% in the east and 59% in the west named ‘social justice’ as one of the most important; 43% in the east and 41% in the west named ‘labor market policy’ (Hoff, Twardowski 2005). Niedermayer’s (2006: 538) above-cited analysis yielded the conclusion that proximity to the welfare-state interventionist pole of the socio-economic conflict dimension provided the common denominator for the party’s electorate and, accordingly, ‘The Left Party.PDS does not have to perform a balancing act of different political messages to its two voter segments but, rather, can concentrate on consistently communicating its positioning as representative of the welfare-state pole in the socio-economic line of conflict of the party system.’ It was in this context that the PDS saw fit to reconstitute itself as simply ‘The Left’ with the 2007 merger.

4. KSČM

4.1. 1990–1998

The history of the KSČM likewise began with an Extraordinary Congress in December 1989, after mass demonstrations had forced the party leadership to resign *en masse* and President Gustáv Husák to appoint a non-communist transitional government before resigning shortly thereafter. At the congress, the KSČ (Communist Party of Czechoslovakia) central committee declared its intention ‘to transform itself into a modern left party (...), while not diverging from the ideals and programmatic goals of the era when it was founded’ (Grzymała-Busse 2002: 84). This was another way of saying organizational change through decentralization – and the activation of a largely orthodox membership base – coupled with programmatic continuity. The party statute of 1990 provided for broad autonomy rights for the regional and local branches (‘committees’), defining the latter as ‘self-managing’ units, with the central committee carrying out regular consultative votes of the membership on current issues (Grzymała-Busse 2002: 84–86; Hanley 2002: 154). The central committee – which, unlike in the PDS, was dominated by anti-reform elements even after the Extraordinary Congress – understood that it would be ‘reliant on a stable membership base’ in order to maintain its pro-continuity course; the anti-reform bias in the membership could partly be traced to the banning of KSČ workplace organizations during the transition, which left only the members of street organizations – consisting mainly of pensioners – on the party’s membership rolls (Grzymała-Busse 2002: 85–87). From the beginning, pro-reform groupings were weak and lacked footing in party structures; the Democratic Forum of Communists, which called for a radical break with the past, was represented by only 49 out of the 1600 delegates at the Extraordinary Congress (Grzymała-Busse 2002: 85–87).

The KSČM, formed at the Extraordinary Congress as the Czech division of a federalized KSČ, held its first congress in October 1990, at which the openly reformist film

director Jiří Svoboda, who had even been involved in the formation of the Civic Forum, was elected as party chairman over the anti-reform incumbent Jiří Machalík. In this surprising move, interpreted as aimed at lending the party 'a more acceptable image before the public' (Kunštát 2013: 183), the KSČM suddenly had a radical reformer at the top facing a largely anti-reform executive and membership. At the congress, Svoboda immediately made his intentions clear with a motion to change the party's name to 'Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia: Party of Democratic Socialism', which, however, was rejected by a majority of delegates. In the ensuing struggle that lasted until his 1993 resignation, Svoboda's attempts to change the party's name and identity were indicative of a contradictory balancing act: he insisted on an agenda of programmatic modernization while, at the same time, sharing the party executive's advocacy of a decentralized, member-centered organizational structure. Svoboda affirmed that 'internal party democracy means that we will (...) base ourselves on the opinions and suggestions of the rank and file members and sympathizers far more than before' and, hinting at the trade-off between his modernizing agenda and holding the membership together, even declared that 'we do not want to make gains in public eyes at the cost of losing members' (Grzymała-Busse 2002: 86). Svoboda's initiative of putting a change of party name to a vote by the membership failed spectacularly: between October and December 1991, 75.9% of party members rejected the change on a turnout of 82.3% (Kunštát 2013: 184). As Grzymała-Busse (2002) and others noted for the Czech case, it was not possible to have both decentralized organization and programmatic reform; 'intra-party democracy' with an anti-reform membership served as a 'guardian of the status quo' (Perottino, Poláček 2012: 116).

The KSČM congress of December 1992 adopted a basic program, which remains in force including subsequent addenda. In a further setback for Svoboda, the eight-page document stressed the party's commitment to communism as an abstract ideal, reaffirming the 'ideals of civic freedom on the basis of equality, human solidarity, and social justice. (...) From the ideal of such a universal human community [the KSČM] also derives its name – communist party' (KSČM 1992). The 'limitations and massive disregard of political and economic democracy' under 'so-called real socialism' were criticized and held responsible for the 'discrediting of the ideals', while the ideals themselves were left unquestioned (KSČM 1992). Svoboda, who was re-elected with a large majority *in absentia* at the congress in a show of solidarity after an assassination attempt, nonetheless announced his intention to carry on with his reform proposals. In January 1993, a number of former high-ranking KSČ officials formed the platform 'For Socialism', which unabashedly called for a return to pre-1989 ideology; Svoboda responded with a call for the platform's immediate expulsion and (again) an immediate change of party name. At this juncture, a 'neo-communist' current, spearheaded by deputy party chairman Miroslav Grebeníček and the Marxist philosopher Miloslav Ransdorf, organized as a self-proclaimed middle path between Svoboda and the ultra-traditionalists (Hanley 2002: 146–147; Mareš 2002: 92). Svoboda resigned in March 1993 as it became clear that he had lost all remnants of support within the executive; the June 1993 party congress led to the election of Grebeníček as new chairman, the expulsion of the 'For Socialism' platform, a further rejection of a name change, and an exodus of Svoboda supporters who then formed the party Left Block. The lasting dominance of the 'neo-communist' current up to the present is reflected in the preservation of the 1992 basic

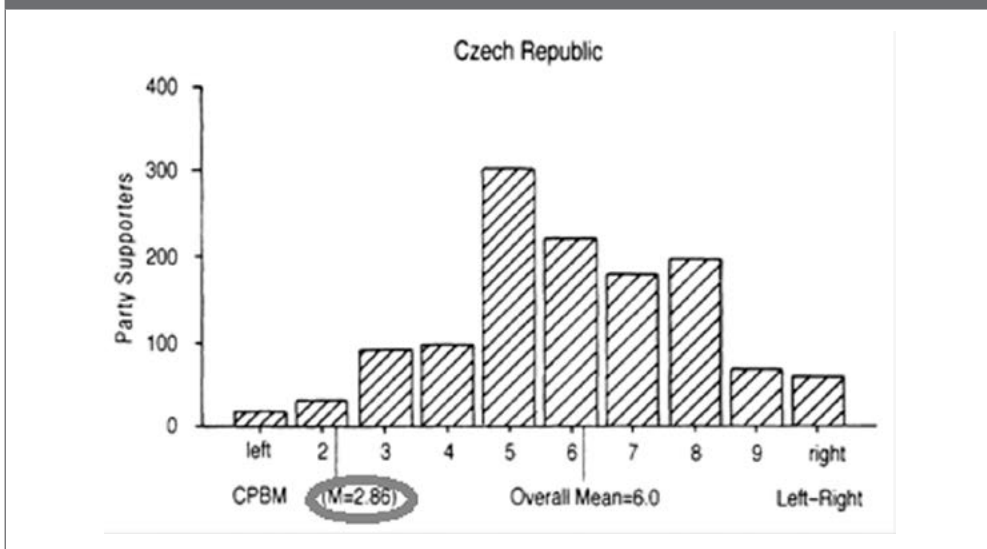
program as well as the long terms in office of Grebeníček (1993–2005) and his successor Vojtěch Filip (since 2005).

The KSČM's positioning in the party system can be analyzed parallel to these developments. In the first free elections of June 1990, held as a *de facto* referendum on communist rule, the KSČ received 13.5% and 13.8% within the Czech Republic for the two chambers of the Czechoslovak parliament and 13.5% for the Czech National Council⁹ – finishing second only to the Civic Forum and suggesting the electoral potential of a non-reformed communist party, especially in the absence of an established competitor on the left, to survive well above the 5% threshold. In the 1992 elections, the KSČM stood as an alliance with the Party of the Democratic Left under the name 'Left Block'¹⁰ – in accordance with Svoboda's strategy of opening the party to other left-wing forces and using an alternative label pending a change of party name. The KSČM won 14.3% and 14.5% for the two chambers of parliament and 14.1% for the Czech National Council, maintaining second place (this time behind the ODS/KDS as the 'main heir' (Pšeja 2005) of the defunct Civic Forum). In the latter result, some 80% of LB voters were returning KSČ voters from 1990, while 6% were former Civic Forum voters from 1990 (Fiala et al. 1999: 185). By contrast, all other parties that won seats in the Czech National Council drew at least 27% of their 1992 votes from the 1990 Civic Forum electorate; the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD), which improved its vote share to 6.5% in 1992, drew 42% of its votes from 1990 Civic Forum voters (Fiala et al. 1999: 185).

This broad dispersion of the 1990 Civic Forum vote onto all parties except the KSČM in 1992 suggests the preservation of the 'communist vs. anti-communist' antagonism, expressed in 1990 by the Civic Forum and the KSČ as the largest and second largest parties, as a secondary conflict dimension in the party system that became further consolidated with the KSČM's isolation following the definitive failure of Svoboda's reform efforts by 1993 (Handl, Goffin 2016). In 1995, the ČSSD congress passed the 'Bohumín resolution', which ruled out all cooperation with the KSČM and other 'extremist political parties' (Koubek et al. 2012) – after the KSČM had, at its own congress earlier that year, called for a 'broad left-wing, patriotic, anti-right-wing grouping' to contest the right's hold on power (Hanley 2002: 158). While the 'socio-economic cleavage of transformation' remained dominant in the Czech party system (Hloušek, Kopeček 2008) – the market liberalism of Václav Klaus's ODS being particularly pronounced – it was moderated by the secondary conflict dimension of 'communism vs. anti-communism', which prevented the ČSSD from aligning with the KSČM against the right.

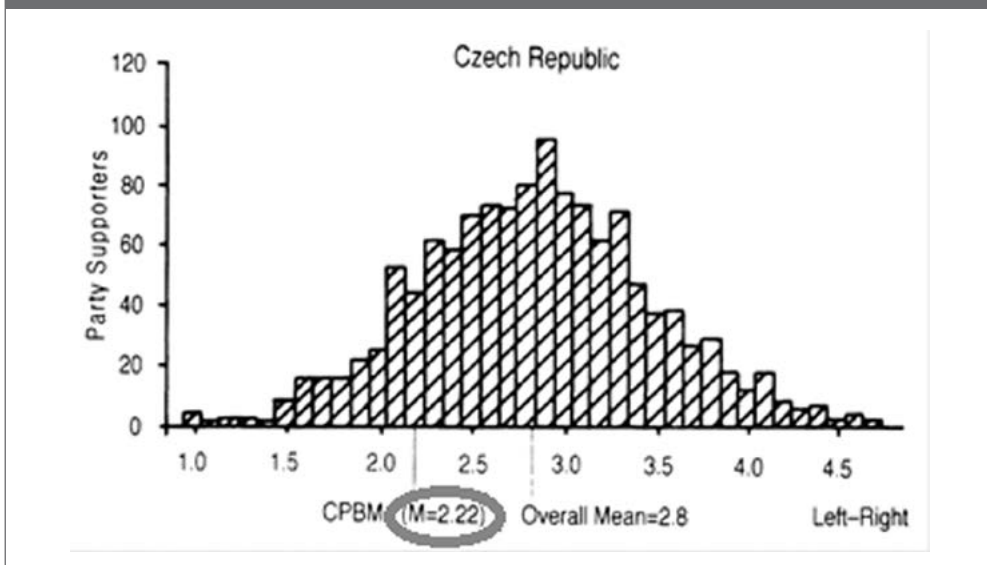
In the 1996 parliamentary election, the ČSSD succeeded in overtaking the KSČM for the first time, winning 26.4% to the latter's 10.3%; in the context of the KSČM's confirmed non-reform, the ČSSD presented itself as a broad moderate-left (pro-market and pro-European integration) outfit in the Polish and Hungarian mold (Hanley 2002: 160–162). While the KSČM lost 14.2% of its 1992 voters to the ČSSD,¹¹ it held 67% of its 1992 electorate (Fiala et al. 1999: 186). The demographic breakdown of the KSČM's 1996 voters showed heavy imbalances: 49.7% of them were over 60 years old, 73.9% had a low level of education (i.e. no Matura), and 54.0% were in the lowest income bracket (Fiala et al. 1999: 188). In addition, a 1994 study showed that KSČM voters strongly identified themselves as left-wing on a left-right scale – well to the left, on average, of the rest of the population – and were close

Figure 6: The (self-)positioning of the KSČM electorate on the left-right scale, 1994



Source: Evans and Whitefield (1995: 571).

Figure 7: The positioning of the KSČM electorate along the socio-economic conflict dimension of the Czech party system, 1994



Source: Evans and Whitefield (1995: 570).

to the state-interventionist pole of the socio-economic conflict dimension (see figures 6 and 7). This combination of an overaged, 'resource-weak' (with Niedermayer), highly loyal electorate and a communist party identity – all of which led to isolation within the party

system – led Hanley (2002) to conclude that the KSČM was a ‘subcultural party’ oriented toward a ‘logic of constituency representation’ rather than a ‘logic of electoral competition’ (Kitschelt 1989).¹²

4.2. 1998–2013

After the 1998 parliamentary election, in which the ČSSD became the largest party for the first time with 32.3% of the vote, the so-called Opposition Agreement between the ČSSD and ODS enabled the former to rule as a minority government tolerated by the latter. This *de facto* Grand Coalition created a situation in which the KSČM constituted ‘the only relevant *left-wing* opposition party’, ‘the only *radical* opposition party with anti-system thrust’ (after the Republicans had fallen short of the 5% threshold), and ‘the only party represented in parliament that *has not yet governed* and thus could not discredit itself as a result’ (Lang 1999: 4). The 2002 election, in other words, would become a classic ‘third-generation election’ in which two major party camps had not only already taken turns governing, but had also effectively governed together for the past four years. In this context, the KSČM (1999) strengthened its oppositional profile; the 1999 party congress adopted the ‘Program of Renewal’ as an addendum to the basic program, presenting a damning verdict of a country ‘in crisis’ and proposing measures aimed at full employment, such as public jobs creation programs at the local level and increased investment in education, health, and other public services. The 2002 election program further bemoaned the ‘bad economic and social situation’ and the insufficient ‘tempo of [economic] growth’, while articulating the classic ‘third-generation election’ message that the current party of government was just as bad as the previous: ‘The ČSSD government has not changed too much in the negative trends of the current development. By its hands, the ODS has basically governed thanks to the Opposition Agreement’ (KSČM 2002). Thus, the KSČM was in fact very much pursuing a ‘logic of electoral competition’ and, specifically, targeting the ‘vacuum’ in the electorate left behind by a compromised ČSSD.

In the 2002 election, the KSČM attained 18.5% of the vote – its best result to date – with the ČSSD remaining the largest party with 30.2% and forming a coalition government with the Christian Democrats (KDU-ČSL) and Liberals (US-DEU). The KSČM succeeded in winning over 6% of the ČSSD’s 1998 voters (corresponding to 2% of the entire 1998 electorate), but also lost 7% of its 1998 electorate to the ČSSD; nonetheless, it held 84% of its 1998 electorate – an even higher figure than in previous elections (STEM 2002a). The demographic imbalances in the KSČM electorate remained in place, apart from a marginal rise in the share of 18-to-29-year-olds from 5 to 7%.¹³ The vacuum strategy was partly successful, with the ČSSD losing more votes by far to the KSČM than to any other party.

In the 2006 election, by contrast, the KSČM (2006) changed its signaling strategy, arguing that ‘in the elections the people will choose between a neo-liberal right-wing politics, represented above all by the ODS – and a left-wing politics, tied to the aspiration of a preservation and expansion of the basic values of the welfare state’ and emphasizing its own ‘responsibility of a strong left-wing party, to which the hope of voters and sympathizers of a left-wing and democratic persuasion turns.’ The KSČM thus presented itself, more so than

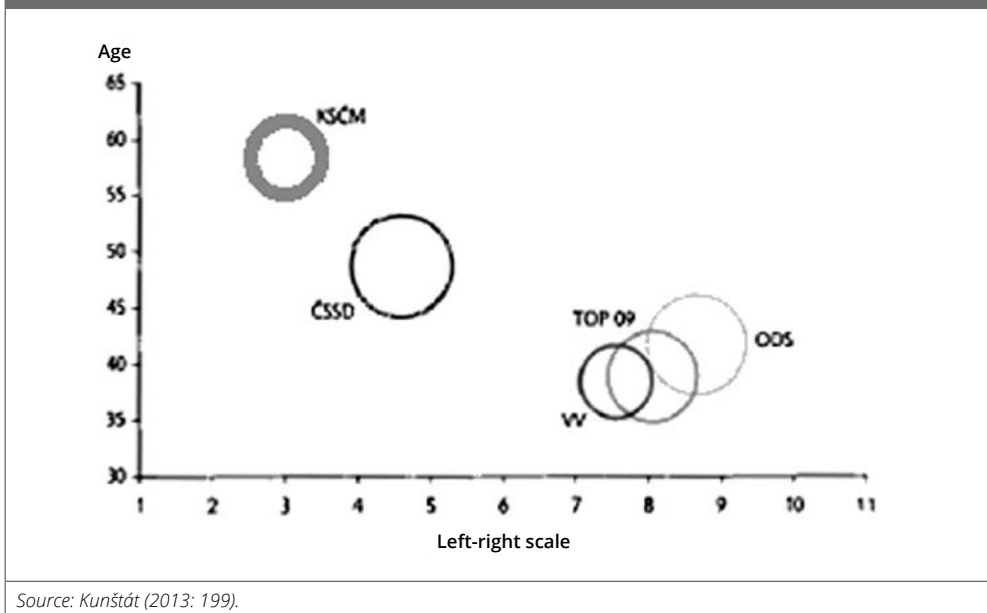
in any previous election, as ready for some form of a governing arrangement with the ČSSD – a confusing signal given the ČSSD's unchanged refusal to work with the KSČM and its status as ruling party in coalition with two center-right parties. In the election, the KSČM fell to 12.8% and the ČSSD returned to its 1998 level with 32.3%. Yet the subsequent formation of a center-right coalition government with a razor-thin majority led to a period of 'qualified 'impersonal' cooperation' between the two parties, now united in their efforts to topple the government with a vote of no confidence, which succeeded at the fifth attempt in March 2009 (Koubek et al. 2012). The KSČM (2008) made renewed overtures to the ČSSD, issuing a special 'Appeal to all members and sympathizers of the ČSSD' at its 2008 congress calling for a 'broad cooperation of socially responsible forces.' The 2010 election campaign, in which the ČSSD led the polls for an extended period, was characterized by warnings from the center-right camp of a potential ČSSD-KSČM collaboration, with ČSSD chairman Paroubek affirming that the KSČM remained its 'main enemy on the left' (Koubek et al. 2012). Both parties suffered losses in the election, with the KSČM falling to 11.3%.

How successful has the KSČM been in making inroads into the left-of-ČSSD 'vacuum', especially since the first 'third-generation election' of 2002? A 2010 study (Kunštát 2013: 222) that asked KSČM voters about their voting behavior in all national elections since 1990 found that, of the KSČM's 2010 voters, the following (remarkably high) percentages voted for the KSČM (or KSČ in 1990 or Left Block in 1992) in previous elections: 73.5% (1990), 74% (1992), 75% (1996), 78% (1998), 77.5% (2002), 81% (2006). The percentages of the KSČM's 2010 voters who voted for the ČSSD in these previous elections were 3% (1990), 4% (1992), 6% (1996), 8.5% (1998), 11.5% (2002), 12% (2006). For all other parties (including 'did not vote'), the corresponding percentage never exceeded 3.5% at any given election, suggesting a particular dependence of the KSČM on voter inflows from the ČSSD.¹⁴ The results yielded a different picture, however, when the percentages were calculated out of the KSČM's 2010 'marginal electorate', defined as those who did not vote KSČM in every election; here, the share of former ČSSD voters came to 10% (1990), 13% (1992), 20% (1996), 29% (1998), 39% (2002), 38% (2006). Here, too, the ČSSD constitutes the only major source of new voters for the KSČM; noticeable also is the spike in the inflow of former ČSSD voters (again, as a percentage of the 2010 KSČM marginal electorate) from 1998 to 2002. The KSČM, then, appears to be particularly dependent on a 'third-generation election' logic of attracting disaffected voters from the ČSSD.

Figure 8, which maps the parties at the 2010 parliamentary election based on their voters' left-right self-placement and age structure, places these findings in party-system perspective (Kunštát 2013: 199). First, it becomes evident just how important the inflow of former ČSSD voters is for the KSČM given the lopsided age structure and trend of its electorate; the average age has risen nearly continuously since 1998, reaching 58.8 in 2011 (Kunštát 2013: 199). In addition, the fact that the KSČM draws new voters primarily from the ČSSD – the party that it is closest to on the left-right self-placement scale and (most likely, though not part of the above-cited findings) the socio-economic conflict dimension – underscores the defining role of the socio-economic conflict dimension for the KSČM's positioning in the party system.¹⁵ This seems to be the case even with the alleged 'deconsolidation' of the Czech party system in the wake of the entrance of new ('populist') parties into parliament in the 2010 and 2013 elections (Koubek et al. 2012). In the 2013 election, the KSČM won 14.9%

of the vote and was hardly affected by the rise of ANO: in one post-election study of 2013 ANO voters (Mazák 2015), only 0.1% responded as having voted KSČM in 2010, compared to 27% for the ČSSD and 55% for the three center-right parties in government from 2010 to 2013 (ODS, TOP 09, VV).

Figure 8: The positioning of the KSČM electorate on the left-right scale and by age structure, 2010



5. Conclusion

The key conclusion that can be drawn is that the direct causal relationship posited in previous studies between organizational and programmatic change and successor-party electoral success overlooks the level of party competition and, in particular, subsequent iterations thereof starting with ‘third-generation elections.’ In both cases analyzed, it might be said that organizational and programmatic developments, if at all causally meaningful, were mediated by the party-system level – specifically, by the ‘opportunity structure’ created by Social Democratic government participation (Nachtwey 2007): early programmatic reform and delayed organizational centralization within the PDS only met with electoral success once the party could join forces with SPD dissidents to occupy a left-wing pole on a socio-economic conflict dimension in east *and* west, while the KSČM’s course of near-total organizational and programmatic continuity yielded heightened payoffs under a ČSSD government – but only given clear oppositional signaling (i.e. in 2002 as opposed to 2006). This attests to the key importance of (non-)incumbency in post-communist contexts – the analysis can be extended to the SLD and MSZP, which clearly suffered electorally from scandal-ridden

incumbencies – but also to the relative stability of the socio-economic conflict dimension that afforded both parties a measure of electoral security. ‘Third-generation elections,’ then, serve as a temporal marker after which successor-party success has to be understood dynamically rather than path-dependently, taking into account shifting dynamics of party competition subsequent to prior degrees of success.

It is indicative that the major challenges to the electoral stability of both parties in the 2017 election year relate to the further reshuffling of party-system configurations: DIE LINKE is threatened (especially in the east) by the AfD’s ascendancy along a new conflict dimension around immigration and asylum (Bouma 2016) and the KSČM by the apparent erosion of a left-right socio-economic conflict dimension with the continuing rise of ANO, as demonstrated by regional-level elections in both countries in 2016. Whether 2017 will thus mark the end of a chapter – that of the relative success of the strategies analyzed in this paper – remains to be seen.

Footnotes:

1. This is defined – in accordance with standard usage in the literature – as referring to the legal successor organizations of communist-era ruling parties.
2. March (2013), for instance, locates DIE LINKE in the ‘populist socialist’ subtype of ‘radical left parties,’ a far cry from the ‘conservative communism’ of the KSČM.
3. The terminological pair ‘milieu’ and ‘vacuum’ is a reference to Neugebauer and Stöss’s analyses of the PDS (1996; 1999), introduced into the English-speaking literature by Patton (1998; 2006).
4. The SLD even lost parliamentary representation after falling short of the 8% threshold for electoral alliances in the 2015 Sejm election, while the MSZP was only able to return to the 25% mark in 2014 as part of a broad opposition coalition. Slovakia, on the other hand, has always been a difficult case for the comparative literature; with the founding of Smer as a breakaway outfit from the successor party SDL, its establishment as the strongest party in the party system since 2006, and the subsequent re-assimilation of the rump SDL into Smer, it has become difficult to speak of a ‘successor party’ at all in the Slovak context.
5. For this reason, the case analysis of the PDS in this paper ends with the 2007 merger, after which the party cannot be analyzed in the terms set by the successor-party literature of a first-order lineage from the communist past (elite resources, regime type, mode of transition and its financial implications). Patton (2013: 219) also notes that DIE LINKE ‘has differed significantly from the former PDS in terms of programme, personnel and approach.’
6. Two qualifications are in order at this point. Firstly, contrary to Kitschelt’s (2002: 17) premise that ‘German politics in the 1990s had two different party systems, an advanced post-industrial capitalist and a post-communist party system,’ the PDS is analyzed here in the context of a single Germany-wide party system, given that the party was subject to the same framework of competition and rules applied throughout the entire Federal Republic (e.g. the 5% threshold). This does not, however, rule out the presence of post-communist *party-system characteristics* in eastern Germany (where the PDS had the bulk of its electorate), such as high electoral volatility (Niedermayer 1996). Secondly, conflict dimensions in the party system (or ‘cleavages’) are understood here not in the original Lipset-Rokkan (1967) sense of social-structural group conflicts, but as value conflicts (e.g. over socio-economic and socio-cultural issues) and operationalized accordingly through voter attitudes surveys, in line with more contemporary approaches (Inglehart 1984; Kitschelt 1988; Niedermayer 2013).

7. Tellingly, however, Gysi's numerous unorthodox demands were also an attempt to combine a defense of eastern interests (a second chamber of parliament to represent the east) and the rights of a predominantly western German civil society (a third vote on the ballot reserved for representatives of civil society).
8. It has been noted elsewhere that the short-term issues of a potential US invasion of Iraq (which Schröder opposed and Stoiber supported) and the summer 2002 floods (which hit swathes of eastern Germany hard and in which Schröder was widely lauded for his crisis management), coupled with the Bavarian premier Stoiber's unpopularity in the east, played a key role in mobilizing the SPD vote especially in the eastern states (Neugebauer, Stöss 2003; Niedermayer 2003).
9. Data on party vote shares in Czech elections are, unless otherwise noted, from the Czech Statistical Office (www.volby.cz).
10. Not to be confused with the aforementioned Left Block formed by Svoboda supporters in 1993, which then merged into the (still active but marginal) Party of Democratic Socialism (SDS).
11. It is worth noting that the ODS lost 15.4% and the far-right Republicans even 22.0% to the Social Democrats.
12. The apparent parallel between the PDS and the KSČM is that, at least until the late 1990s, both displayed voter-structural characteristics of a 'milieu party' defined by the socio-economic conflict dimension in addition to a secondary conflict dimension (east-west for the PDS and communism vs. anti-communism for the KSČM). But the key difference becomes evident with the geography of this milieu, in turn reflecting the different political conditions of post-communist transformation in the two countries: the PDS had a milieu in one part of the country and was a complete newcomer in another (much larger) part, so that it constantly had to find ways to expand westward and change itself, first programmatically and then organizationally, to this end; the KSČM, on the other hand, was assured of its immediate political survival even as a milieu party subject to the same threshold of 5%. It also cannot be ignored that, as has been shown, the KSČM's electorate was more 'resource-weak' and its membership fundamentally more anti-reform (and its leadership less pro-reform) than the PDS's. While the two parties differed, for all these reasons, in their organizational and programmatic developments, their electoral strategies at the party-system level around 1998 had a key similarity: they both sought to expand beyond their respective 'milieus' by specifically targeting the electoral 'vacuum' generated by the Social Democrats' entry into government.
13. The most important election issues identified by KSČM voters were the 'struggle for power' (24%), social security (20%), and system change (13%), with EU accession near the bottom (5%) in contrast to ČSSD, ODS, and KDU-ČSL/US-DEU voters and contrary to Orenstein's (1998) assumption of an overarching primacy of a demand for European integration (STEM 2002b).
14. It should, of course, be noted that these figures take solely the 2010 KSČM electorate as reference point and thus do not show voter movements from election to election.
15. The above-cited 2010 study confirmed KSČM voters' strong self-identification as 'left-wing', strong identification with socialism and communism, and strongly positive attitudes toward state intervention in the market compared to the rest of the population – but, as far as is known, there is no comparison with voters of other parties available for the socio-economic conflict dimension.

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