

Really Independent? Biographies and Typology of Non-Partisan Presidential Candidates in Europe¹

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Abstract

This research article examines the relatively unresearched area in political science – the non-partisanship in the presidential election in Europe after 1989. Although the apparent clarity of the concept was shown, the phenomenon of non-partisan candidacy is not so clear, and it largely relates to party politics. The analysis introduces the composition of this group of candidates for the office of the head of state in terms of age, education, previous political skills and gender. At the same time, I identified five main types of non-partisan candidates based on their partisan background and their real status at the time of the election. Combining these two factors, it was proved that the phenomenon cannot be examined as a separate question. The analysis shows the complexity of the phenomenon. At the same time, the heterogeneity of the phenomenon is connected with a different level of the party system institutionalisation (PSI), but not so much as would be expected.

Keywords: non-partisanship; candidate; presidential election; typology; party system

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1. Introduction

The crisis of political parties is a general problem that has been appearing in politics for the last several decades (Ignazi, 1996). The permanent decline of the interest of citizens in political socialisation and political party membership brings a phenomenon which is famous at the local level of the political system. It is a non-partisan candidacy that increasingly seeps even on the national level. We can still find independent candidates in presidential elections more often, which is connected to the higher personalisation and type of the electoral system, which gives an advantage to the personal characteristics of the candidates. In presidential elections, any non-partisan candidates were elected. For example, former Slovakian head of state Andrej Kiska. The research on non-partisan candidacy is very popular only in the research of the local politics due to its prevalence. If we look at the national level, except for a few case studies, the research is almost completely missing. Authors do not provide a general description of this problem or comparative studies. This is a complicated topic that deserves detailed research, if only to distinguish between different forms of non-partisan candidacy. Moreover, as it turns out, candidates approach the non-partisan form of candidacy in different ways.

Independent candidacy, not only in the presidential election, is a more complicated problem than can be seen at first glance. First, the definition of a non-partisan candidate is unclear, inconsistent, or completely missing. At the same time, the history of partisanship is not always easily identifiable. Many independent candidates were engaged in political parties or held high partisan or constitutional positions. At the same time, although political parties are increasingly faced with citizen disinterest and a waning willingness to party engagement, they are still an important element of representative democracy (van Biezen, Mair, & Poguntke, 2012, p. 42). In such a case, the presidency is understood as a prestigious position. In the eyes of not only members of political parties, the head of state should be of a certain age and have a certain level of political experience. The composition of elected heads of state in Europe also corresponds to this (Drašar, 2024). However, in the case of candidates who do not rely on the background of a political party, these assumptions are removed. Candidates do not go through any nomination processes and do not have to follow party hierarchy and merits. They are bound only by the constitutional settings for candidacy. Candidates at the threshold of their political career, without previous political involvement or even significantly younger, can enter the race for the presidential position. At the same time, it is necessary to realise that although some are running as non-partisans, their status may not be 'pure', and they may already have party engagements in history. This fact can then distort our idea of biographical characteristics.

In this text, two seemingly different phenomena will be combined. First, I will map the biographical characteristics of non-partisan presidential can-

didates, focusing on age, education, previous political experience, and gender. At this point, I follow the tradition of the previous research about European presidents (Drašar, 2024). Second, I will try to create a simple typology of these candidates based on their partisan history and position in the concrete presidential election. Combining these two aspects will help clarify the true nature of the candidacy of those who present themselves as non-partisan. I will introduce the basic approaches to defining a non-partisan candidate and options for their classification. The next chapter will discuss the methodological approach and data sources for analysis. After that, the next chapter will analyse the composition of non-partisan presidential candidates in terms of biographical characteristics and compare it with the structure of directly elected presidents in Europe. The next part of the article will introduce the attempt at the typology of these candidates regarding the established criteria. The phenomenon will also be described in the context of the level of the party system institutionalisation (PSI) in two European regions – traditional Western democracies and post-communist Central and Eastern Europe.

2. Non-partisan: conceptualisation and the current state of knowledge

The crisis of political partisanship might have a large scale of forms, e.g. electoral volatility, a decrease in partisan identification, a decrease in partisan membership or a performative crisis (Webb, 2005). In addition, below-average trust not only in political parties but also in politicians and institutions is also consistently visible in European surveys (Fitzgerald, 2024). The increasing distrust of political parties is also reflected in the nature of electoral competition. Opposite the proportional electoral system, which is usually based on candidate lists of political parties, the majoritarian system used in most presidential elections allows non-partisan candidacy. This frees up a huge space for those who are not party members or have a negative attitude towards them (on purpose or out of prejudice). This ‘electoral loophole’ provides a unique opportunity to put aside partisanship in general. Politicians and candidates react to the rejection of political parties. In the European presidential elections, there are evidenced cases of purposeful non-partisanship of members of political parties (see Jastramskis, 2021) or former members of political parties. As can be seen, the nature of independent presidential candidates is not so clear, and it is necessary to describe the complexity of this phenomenon.

As mentioned above, the range of occurrence of electoral non-partisanship is different according to the level of politics. This fact is projected into the range of research available on this topic in political science. Regarding the relatively limited number of texts focused on this topic, I will summarise many possible ways in this area to create a complex overview of the research. Independent

candidates are visible mainly on the local level as a classical phenomenon. For example, in the Czech Republic, their participation in the lowest level of the political system is directly expected regarding the highly fragmented municipal structure (Balík, 2009, pp. 18–19). This fact also applies to the political parties themselves, which, given the size of local units, must nominate non-candidates on their candidate lists (Maškarinec & Klimovský, 2016, p. 961; Holtmann, 2008, p. 11). Regarding this fact, non-partisan candidates play a significant role at the local level of the political system generally (Aars & Ringkjøb, 2005). Other research is focused on the problems of electoral support for these candidates rather than non-partisanship globally. Their occurrence is usually associated with the question of institutionalisation of political parties or the socioeconomic structure of voters (Gendźwiłł, 2012; Gendźwiłł & Żółtak, 2014; Kukovič & Haček, 2011). If we look at the higher level of the political system, the non-partisan candidacy relates to the type of electoral system, as was mentioned (Brancati, 2008). Regarding the different levels of personalisation in majoritarian and personalised proportional electoral systems, in the European context, it is the case of the Single Transferable Vote system used in Ireland. Their presence positively influences the electoral process and the legislative assembly (Weeks, 2014, p. 606). In the area of presidential elections, which is the centre of this research, the question of independent candidacy is not researched much (Jastramskis, 2021, p. 194). There are a few case studies focused on the question of electoral support. At the same time, it is important to mention the significance of independent candidates in hybrid or non-democratic regimes. There are persons who have significant financial resources or candidates with a certain bond to the governing regime, which they covertly represent (Tkacheva & Turchenko, 2022).

The area of presidential studies is very popular in political science research in general. The topic is research from many points of view, including the relationship to political parties. Although ‘above-partisans’ are generally required and usually accepted in the presidential office, many Central European heads of state are former constitutional representatives or party leaders (Brunclík & Kubát, 2018, p. 119). There are many cases in which presidents with a partisan history tended to stretch their presidential powers or side with a certain part of the political spectrum. Some even became involved in parties after leaving office (Hloušek et al., 2013, pp. 287–288). Ties on party politics and their admissibility are different throughout the European countries with direct elections (Raunio & Sedelius, 2020, p. 154). At the same time, partisanship in direct presidential elections is not necessarily more partisan. It can be a good position for people who do not have political ambitions (Tavits, 2009, p. 205). Other scholars are researching the topic in the context of presidential activism (Köker, 2017). On the other hand, the question of non-partisan candidacy stays out of the focus of the research interest.

The key question for this article remains how to define a non-partisan presidential candidate. The current knowledge is relatively ununited in this thing and

could be improved on the problem of a generally accepted definition of political party. In layperson's terms, it could be said that a non-partisan is a candidate who is not a member of any political party. This problem is more complicated in the scientific community. It is the same as many authors from the area of the theory of political parties have resigned to give up trying to create a comprehensive and universally valid definition of political party (Fiala & Strmiska, 1998, p. 39); it is similar to the case of a non-partisan candidate. Several authors do not mention the issue of conceptualising a non-partisan candidate at all in their works (e.g. Aars & Ringkjøb, 2005; Gendźwiłł, 2012). One of the approaches used most often is the layperson's definition mentioned above. In this context, a non-partisan candidate is an applicant to a political office who is not a member of a political party in the election. A somewhat 'stricter' definition can then be that only a candidate who has never in history applied for a political position in the colours of a political party can be considered a non-partisan candidate (Jastramskis, 2021, p. 195). If I chose this approach, the number of analysed cases would significantly reduce. At the same time, it would make the typology almost impossible. Regarding these situations, I prefer the first option. I will consider a candidate running for election in a specific election as a non-partisan. This approach better reflects the range of possibilities for the concept of non-partisanship. This approach is more appropriate for the analytical framework of this text.

In the case of the classification options question, I came across the warnings of some authors. They hold the opinion that the creation of general categorisation is very difficult or completely impossible (Busteed, 1990; Coakley, 2003). To a certain extent, one can agree with the above-mentioned argument, consisting of a reserved attitude towards the universality of the typology. This analysis will focus exclusively on the area of Europe on a fixed time horizon. Nevertheless, there can be found authors and isolated cases that have tried to solve this problem. One of them is Liam Weeks (2009), who created a unique typology of non-partisans (he uses the term 'independent') related to the area of Irish politics. Although this classification is based on a single case study, for the purposes of this research, it can be useful. The author distinguishes six categories – Vestigial Independents, Corporatist Independents, Ideological Independents, Community Independents, Apostate Independents and Quasi-parties (Weeks, 2009, p. 9). The last type could be very suitable for any general analyses regarding the fact that there are political formations founded with the aim of supporting the candidate in the election (Weeks, 2009, pp. 26–27). This phenomenon is also known as a presidential party (see Passarelli, 2020). These parties could be met in any of the semi-presidential regimes where the executive power is held by the prime minister and ministers (Duverger, 1980, p. 166). The linkage to the executive is very important in the case of the head of state. The president cannot govern independently in this regime but through the government (Sartori, 1994). The candidate who is not a party member might be motivated to create their own political party. In a parliamen-

tary election, usually following the presidential election in a semi-presidential regime, the president can dominate parliament and enforce their own policies. Here, Emmanuel Macron, Éric Zemmour, and partly Volodymyr Zelensky can be named as representatives or candidates in countries considered semi-presidential regimes (Duverger, 1980; Protsyk, 2003).

The last question, which is necessary to introduce briefly regarding the topic of the article, is the tradition of research on the biographical characteristics of political representation. The suitability of candidates for legislative and executive offices is frequently evaluated in terms of age, education, and previous political experience. We can meet mainly descriptions of elected political representatives rather than candidates in the research. Analyses are focused on the legislative power in single case studies (e.g. Esaiasson & Holmberg, 2017; Linek & Šalamounová, 2001; Linek, 2009; Shepard, McGarvey, & Cavanagh, 2003) or in the comparative perspective (Eliassen & Pedersen, 1978). A large scale of the articles in this area is focused on the executive power, especially the cabinet composition (e.g. Brunclík, 2020; Dowding & Dumont, 2009; Fleischer & Seyfried, 2015; Grimaldi & Verseci, 2018). Most studies focus on the question of political experiences and the allocation of minister portfolios based on these facts (Blondel & Thiébault, 1991; Semenova, 2018). In the area of presidential elections, the current state of knowledge is very poor. Here is the article focused on the composition of presidential offices in terms of biographical characteristics published recently (Drašar, 2024). This article will be used to compare elected presidents. In this research, I will try to enrich the existing knowledge not only in presidential elections but also by focusing on candidates, not only elected politicians.

The article is theoretically framed by the concept of party system institutionalisation (PSI), which captures the nature of relations and competition among political parties (Stauber, 2017, p. 47). The authors disagree on the definition of the basic indicators of the PSI. Any of them emphasises the nature of government cooperation and access to the cabinet (e.g. Enyedi & Casal Bértoa, 2018; Mair, 1998), which is not so suitable in the context of presidential elections. More important are factors related to the nature of electoral competition. There are data about electoral volatility, party system fractionalisation (Bielasiak, 2002), the Index of party stabilisation (Lewis, 2006) or the age of political parties or party membership (Enyedi & Casal Bértoa, 2018) used. Many authors identified significant differences between Western democracies and post-communist Central and Eastern Europe, which will help me explain the heterogeneity of non-partisans in both regions. Political parties in post-communist area, due to the relatively recent transition to democracy, lean to the support not yet fully anchored and profiled electorate (Mair, 1998, p. 188). They tend to change their political preferences more often, which is reflected in higher electoral volatility. Although this approach may be disadvantageous in certain aspects (Kim, 2023, p. 4), for the purposes of this article, it is not so important. At the same time, the lower

level of PSI in post-communist Europe was demonstrated in many quantitative indicators (Enyedi & Casal Bértoa, 2018)

3. Data and methods

The analytical part of this text will include two methodological techniques. A descriptive approach will be used to analyse the composition of candidates in terms of basic biographical characteristics. It is very important to research the issue of non-partisan candidacy, given the relatively limited current state of research on this phenomenon. At the same time, I will focus on a brief comparison with the structure of elected heads of state in Europe after 1989 (Drašar, 2024). However, considering the greater diversity of candidates in many characteristics, the range of categories will be wider. The second approach will be the typological method, which divides phenomena into separate categories (Collier, Laporte, & Seawright, 2008, p. 153; Drulák, 2008, p. 19). Synthesising these two parts, the complex view of non-partisan candidacy will be gained. Results will also be evaluated in the context of PSI. Regarding the lower level of PSI, it can be expected that candidates in post-communist countries would tend to cover their real partisan status, and they would not be really independent. On the other hand, candidates in Western Europe would not have a need to cover their partisanship, and independent candidates would be without a partisan history. It is also necessary to set the criteria for classification into categories. Considering the need for the actuality of information, I will focus on the party engagement in the past (former member of the political party) and the real status in the concrete presidential election (strict non-partisanship versus more or less hidden party support). Regarding the potential breadth of the research, in terms of conceptualisation, I will approach non-partisan presidential candidates as people who do not run for any political party in the concrete election. This approach will allow for more detailed classification.

In terms of the local and temporal delimitation, I will focus on European countries that adopted direct elections for the selection of the head of state. This delineation is especially useful regarding the capture of public opinion in elections and the assumption that, in the case of indirect elections, nominations of non-partisans occur very rarely. In terms of time, the research is limited to the period 1990 to 2023. This periodisation is chosen regarding the process of democratic transition in Central and Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s, and thus the possibility of including these countries in the analysis. It is here that I find the above-mentioned problem emphasised by some authors: the difficulty of creating a universal typology. It is important to say that this is not the goal of the article. The author is aware of the limitations of the research in terms of time and the area in which the analysis is carried out.

Sources of information for both parts of the research are the official curricula vitae of presidential candidates, available from public sources. For example, websites of the applicants for the head of state position, newspaper articles in online media, and encyclopedias. Based on these sources, information about 363 presidential candidates who ran for the presidency as non-partisan was collected according to the literature (Nohlen & Stöver, 2010), official statistics and other public sources about elections. Nevertheless, there is a problem with finding information about candidates who are not so famous and do not have significant electoral results. In these cases, the candidate will be excluded from the analysis of the concrete factor. I will work with him only if information about the characteristics is available. There was also a problem with confusing information about the political involvement of some candidates, where it is not clear whether they left the party a long time ago or shortly before the election. In such cases, they are automatically classified as Former partisan. Given the chosen research design, this procedure is the only option if we want to maintain the breadth of the dataset and not reduce the number of cases to only those where we have all the information available. This procedure is the best way to capture the complexity of the phenomenon. For each graph describing the quantitative indicators about presidential candidates, the note will mention the number of analysed cases and cases with missing information. Table 1 summarises the number of candidates included in the analysis, divided according to part of Europe, regarding the political history and presence of non-democratic regimes before 1989.

Table 1:
Number of non-partisan candidates in analysed countries

Western European democracies		Post-communist Europe	
Austria	12	Bulgaria	32
Cyprus	33	Croatia	21
Finland	6	Czech Republic	13
France	2	Lithuania	24
Iceland	3	Moldova	17
Ireland	11	Montenegro	4
Portugal	11	North Macedonia	2
Turkey	2	Poland	20
		Romania	18
		Slovakia	28
		Slovenia	18
		Serbia	29
		Ukraine	57
TOTAL	80	TOTAL	283

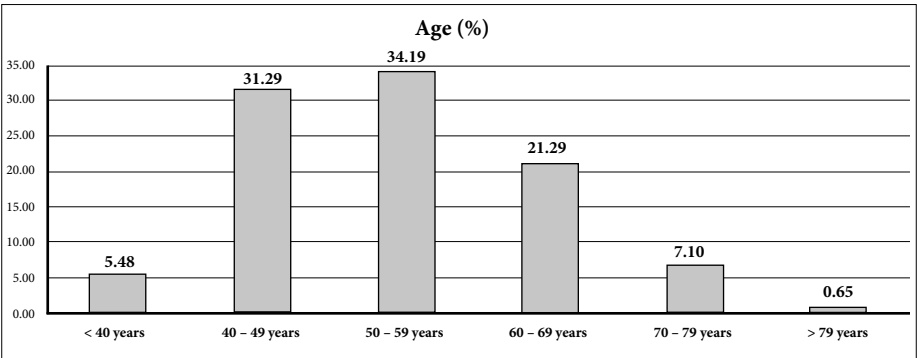
Source: The author.

As can be seen, the phenomenon of non-partisan candidacy has expanded mainly in post-communist Europe. It is not only about the number of countries that use the direct election of the head of state, but also about the number of candidates without the support of a political party participating in the elections. This phenomenon is undoubtedly closely related to the position of political parties and the PSI. The average age and party membership are lower than in Western Europe, the number of new parties and electoral volatility are higher on the other hand (Enyedi & Casal Bértoa, 2018). This somewhat negative view of political partisanship and the changing nature of the party system obviously leads to a preference for non-partisan candidacy. Many of these candidates then appear across countries. They are often people less known to the public with marginal electoral results, for whom it is impossible to find more detailed information. In these countries, information is missing the most.

4. Who are non-partisan candidates?

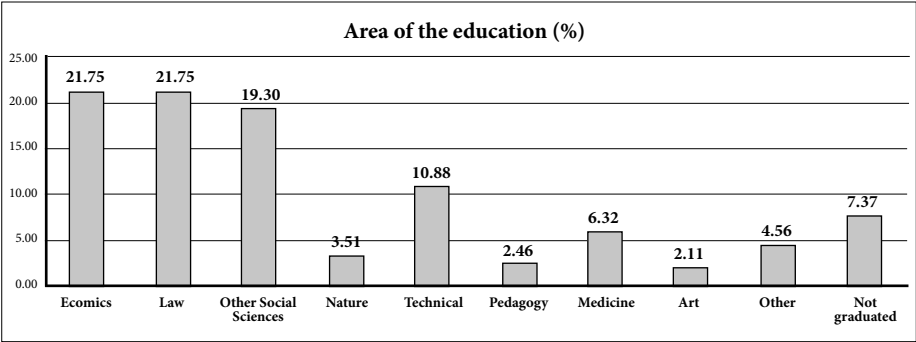
In this chapter, I will focus on the introduction of the results and the composition of the data in the area of biographical characteristics of non-partisan presidential candidates. The basic composition of results will be introduced, and any interesting aspects will be highlighted. At the same time, the results will be placed in a comparative perspective, with the results of the analysis focused on directly elected presidents after 1989 (Drašar, 2024). In the note, under each of the graphs, the number of analysed cases and the number of them where the information about the characteristic was not identified will be mentioned

Figure 1:
Age structure of non-partisan presidential candidates



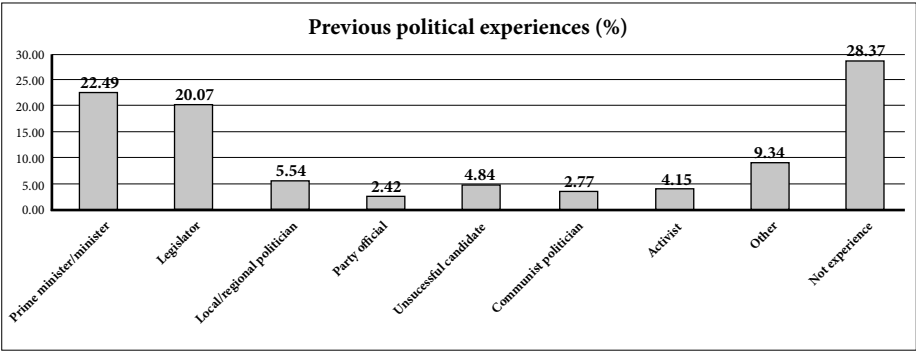
Source: own processing; N = 310 (53 not identified)

Figure 2:
Educational structure of non-partisan presidential candidates



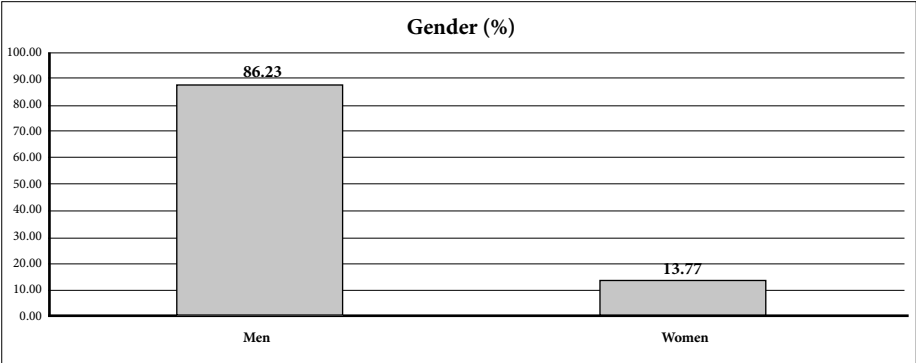
Source: own processing; N = 285 (78 not identified)

Figure 3:
Political experiences of non-partisan presidential candidates



Source: own processing; N = 289 (74 not identified)

Figure 4:
Gender structure of non-partisan presidential candidates



Source: own processing; N = 363

The question of the age of presidential candidates resonates in public discussions, especially in the context of the political experiences of the candidate very often. There are opinions that the presidency should be the peak of a political career. As can be seen in Figure 1, non-partisan presidential candidates span the entire age spectrum, with the most represented categories in the forties and fifties. This phenomenon corresponds with the results of the research focused on directly elected presidents (Drašar, 2024, p. 133), who represent approximately the same share of the total number of analysed cases. From a percentage perspective, the structure of European heads of state corresponds to the category of the sixties, the same as candidates younger than 40 years. As is postulated in this analysis, a significantly lower percentage of this category is influenced by the constitutional limit for holding the presidential office in the form of the setting of the age census (Drašar, 2024, pp. 122–123). It is 40 years old, most often, possibly also 35 years old, or this condition is not mentioned or specified in the constitutional text. If I look at the structure of the dataset, the youngest candidates usually come from countries belonging to the category of 40–49 years and 50–59 years old. For example, Bulgaria, Serbia, Ukraine, Poland or Romania. If I look at the second end of the scale, these candidates are represented by a lower proportion of the total number of cases compared to the analysis of elected European presidents. Generally, it can be said that compared to the structure of elected presidents in Europe, the age composition is very similar (Drašar, 2024, p. 133).

Areas of education are divided into a few categories, including specialisation. In the case of social sciences, there is a high proportion of candidates. Considering this fact, this area was divided into three different categories – economics, law, and social sciences. The last of these categories includes a larger scale of areas (e.g. political science, history, philology, sociology, area studies, etc.). Figure 2 shows that the majority of presidential candidates graduated in social sciences. From a global point of view, this finding corresponds to the structure of education for European heads of state (Drašar, 2024, p. 134). From the comparative perspective, a significant increase can be seen in candidates without a university graduation. Despite this fact, they become the fifth most represented group. This fact may point to a certain specificity in the selection of partisan candidates when even the level of education can play a role, not only for the presidential office. The category ‘Other’ includes all fields of education that do not represent any other. For example, agriculture or military. The second-mentioned field appears very often in the dataset.

Considering the nature of the phenomenon of non-partisan presidential candidates, I should expect a high dominance of people who do not have any experience in politics. This thesis corresponds with the conceptualisation of non-partisan created by Jastramskis (2021) as a person who has never applied for office as a political party representative. In the logic of representative democracy, the political experience in the case of partisan candidates is expected, although

not exclusively. Political parties can also nominate an ‘external’ candidate for the presidential office. The categorisation will show to what extent the concept of a non-partisan candidate is appropriate for the purposes of this article, or if it would be more appropriate to move to a narrower definition. Looking at the results summarised in Figure 3, it can be said that the assumption presented above is only partially valid. Somewhat surprisingly, in the cumulative total, more politicians have experience at the national level. Specifically, these are prime ministers or members of executive cabinets. Therefore, it can be concluded that the chosen approach in the form of conceptualising a non-partisan candidate as a person who is not the nominee of any political party in the concrete election was suitable for the purposes of this analysis and is also suitable for the following typology of non-party candidates. The issue of non-partisanship is evidently more complex than it seems at first glance. Two moments can be highlighted from a comparative perspective with elected presidents (Drašar, 2024). First, a relatively high number of candidates are former municipal politicians, which can be to some extent related to the above-mentioned non-partisan nature of the local level of the political system (see Aars & Ringkjøb, 2005). Furthermore, there is a relatively low representation of former communist regime politicians compared to elected presidents (Drašar, 2024, p. 135). This fact can be justified by their loyalty to party politics, as candidates ran for office as partisans of new or reformed formations shortly after the fall of communism. As shown in Figure 3, a significant share of candidates in the dataset are former high constitutional politicians, members of parliament, party officials or members of the government. Although the category of executives must be taken with a grain of salt regarding the possibility of the existence of technocratic governments and their non-partisan nature (McDonnell & Valbruzzi, 2014, p. 656), the share is certainly not negligible.

It is generally known that politics suffers from a highly inadequate representation of the very low increase of women at all levels of the political system (see Allen & Cutts, 2019; Lovenduski & Norris, 2003). In this part of the chapter, I will look at the gender structure of non-partisan presidential candidates by comparing the share of representation of men and women in the collected dataset. In terms of elected European presidents, men highly prevail (Drašar, 2024, p. 136). Therefore, whether it will also be confirmed in the research of non-partisan candidates is a question. As can be seen in the figure above, the inadequate representation of women is not only a problem of elected offices but also the structure of candidates and the whole of politics generally. Therefore, the lack of sufficient female candidates is not only an exclusive problem of political parties. The dataset shows an overwhelming majority of men’s non-partisan presidential candidates. Additionally, the structure corresponds to the ratio of representation of both genders in the dataset of directly elected presidents.

5. All the same? Typology of non-partisan presidential candidates

In the following chapter, I get to the heart of the problem that this article deals with. An attempt at typology creation will be introduced in this section. As was mentioned above, the criterion for the classification in this case will be the nature of the party history of the non-partisan presidential candidate and the real status in the election in which the candidate entered. However, adding a few procedural and additional methodological notes is still necessary in this section. From the point of view of typology, the chronological order will be followed, and the more recent status will be considered. Therefore, if the presidential candidate was a member of a political party in the past (for example, a member of the party in a non-democratic regime) and subsequently ran as a non-partisan candidate supported by a certain political party, the support of the party will be considered as a criterion for the classification.

Based on the available data on the party history of the candidates, I have identified five categories of non-partisan presidential candidates presented in more detail in the following subsections. The second category is subsequently divided into two separate subcategories. Although these candidates have the same characteristics, their nature is different depending on the nature of the political regime. The rule of at least partial communication with other typological and conceptual approaches was observed when naming them.

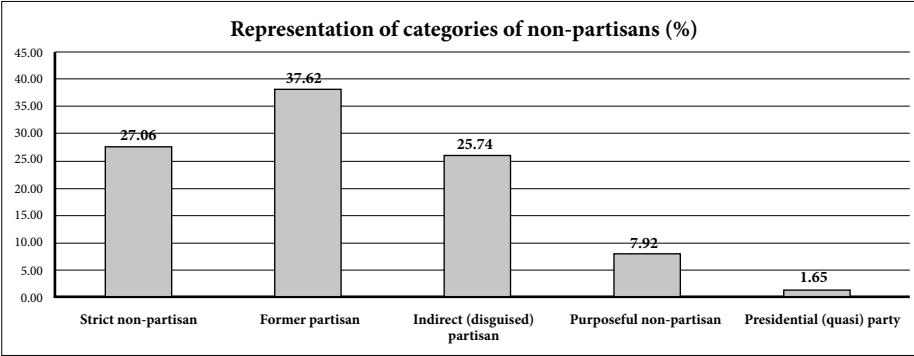
Table 2:
Types of non-partisan presidential candidates

No.	Category/subcategory
1)	Strict non-partisan
2)	Former partisan
	a) Democratic former partisan
	b) Communist former partisan
3)	Indirect (disguised) partisan
4)	Purposeful non-partisan
5)	Presidential (quasi) party

Source: The author

Before the individual categories are introduced in more detail, it is advisable to focus on the quantitative comparison of these constructed types at least briefly. The following graph presents the proportion among categories using the same logic as in the previous chapter. The 'Former partisan' category is represented by a share of candidates in total only. The proportion of both subcategories is described below.

Figure 5:
Percentage representation of categories of non-partisans in the dataset



Source: own processing; N = 303 (60 not identified)

It can be read from the quantitative evaluation that a narrower definition of the non-partisan candidate would not be appropriate in this case. The ‘Former partisan’ category emerged as the most numerous in the European area. Strict non-partisans and Indirect partisans have comparable representation. On the contrary, presidential (quasi) parties are an exceptional situation in the European context. Moreover, upon closer inspection, these are found only in two semi-presidential regimes – in France and Ukraine, and only on the horizon of the last few years. In the following paragraphs, the categories are described.

5.1 Strict non-partisan

The first type of non-partisan candidate corresponds to a narrow conceptualisation of this phenomenon when the candidate for the presidential office has never been a political party member or run for any office with party affiliation or support. This approach is in accordance with the conceptual approach of the non-partisan candidate mentioned by Jastramskis (2021, p. 195). Here can be named Szymon Hołownia, the current chairman of the Seim in Poland (ran for the presidency in 2020); former head of state in Slovakia Andrej Kiska (elected in 2014); Czech senators Pavel Fischer and Marek Hilšer (in their first election in 2018) or Karel Diviš (in 2023) as representatives of this category. Nevertheless, it is important to say that their strict non-partisanship applies only to the presidential election. Therefore, the category does not evaluate and exclude their later membership in political parties or even founding their own political formations, which happened to several people mentioned above.

5.2 Former partisan

The second category corresponds with the broader definition of a non-partisan candidate. It defines it only in relation to the presidential election, as it is conceptualised in most research focused on this topic. Its essence is former membership in a political party holding a high state or party office. Nevertheless, the candidate is not a member of this political party at the time of the election. At the same time, I do not include candidates supported by their former home parties in this category. Due to the time sequence, I include such cases in the following category. On the contrary, I can include non-partisans who applied for some political post in party colours here. The category is divided into two subcategories regarding different historical and political developments of European countries in relation to the presence of a democratic regime:

- a) **Democratic former partisan:** Candidates with a party affiliation in a democratic regime are included here only. It consists of ‘traditional’ Western democracies, the same as countries in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of communism. Representatives of these categories can be named, for example, Czech former prime minister Mirek Topolánek (ran for the presidency in 2018); former Slovakian presidents Michal Kováč (in 1999) and Rudolf Schuster (in 2004). All of them were members of political parties but later ran for office as independents, especially for the second term.
- b) **Communist former partisan:** Compared to the previous subcategory, former representatives of pro-regime parties within a non-democratic regime who did not join any party after the democratic transition are included here. Examples might be named the first Ukrainian president after gaining independence, Leonid Kravchuk (elected in 1990), former Lithuanian head of state Dalia Grybauskaitė (in 2009 – although she was minister of finance, she was not a party member) or Tomáš Zima, former rector of Charles University (ran for the presidency in 2023). It is necessary to say that this situation is very rare in the European context. However, this subcategory could be described as a minority.

5.3 Indirect (disguised) partisan

This type of candidate corresponds with the conceptualisation of the ‘non-partisan in disguise’ used in the previous research (Jastramskis, 2021, p. 201). Candidates for the presidential office in this category ran as non-party candidates, but they were supported by the political parties directly or indirectly. These are often former party officials or are supported by parties that did not nominate any candidate in the presidential election. There are also presidential candidates relying on

a certain form of support from a part of a political party, a political party in the past, another constitutional official, or some connection to party candidates. It is also common that candidates in this category later, after the election, become members of this political party (Enyedi & Linek, 2008, p. 467). As representatives of this category can be named Petr Pavel, the current Czech president (elected in 2023), Slovakian representative in the European Commission, Maroš Šefčovič (ran for the presidency in 2019) and Aleksander Kwaśniewski (only in 2000).

5.4 Purposeful non-partisan

In some European countries, the head of state is constitutionally or informally expected not to be a political party member. Likewise, candidates may avoid partisanship due to high distrust of political parties. The second option is the necessity of independence in the presidential office. For example, in Romania, the head of state must leave the party membership after the election (Javůrek, 2008, p. 102). In this category, there are candidates for the presidential office who, although they are party members, leave the party for the purpose of the presidential election or suspend their party membership. Therefore, their move is purely purposeful for selecting the head of state. As a representative of this type, the current Austrian head of state, Alexander van der Bellen (in 2016), who left the party precisely because of the presidential election, can be named. At the same time, the later prime minister of Ukraine, Arseny Yatsenyuk (who ran for the presidency in 2010), was a member of the party but did not run for it in the election. Very similar case is former Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko (in 2004 and 2010).

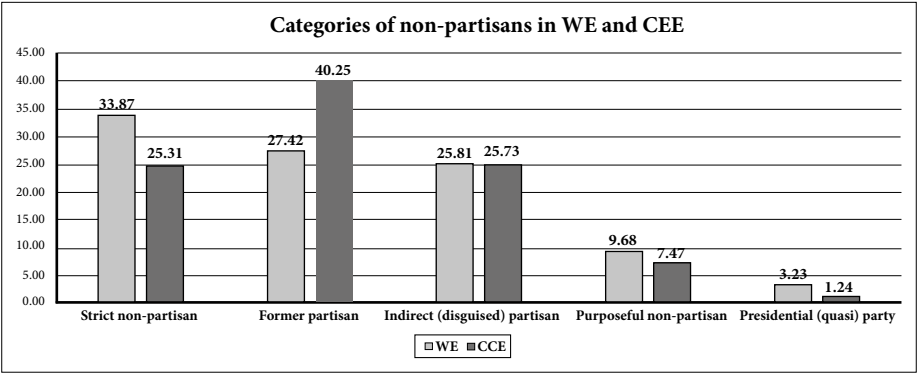
5.5 Presidential (quasi) Party

The last category corresponds to the quasi-party category defined by Weeks (2009). It is a political party founded to support the candidacy of a given candidate for the presidency. This party is usually founded shortly before the election and is closely associated with a given candidate. It is also important to note that this type of candidate is usually connected with the semi-presidential political regime regarding the existence of a dual executive (Duverger, 1980; Elgie, 1999). Examples include former Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko (in 2019), former Polish head of state Lech Wałęsa (only in 1995), current French head of state Emmanuel Macron (elected in 2017) or French journalist Éric Zemmour (ran in the election in 2022). On the contrary, I do not include the presidential candidacy of Marek Hilšer in 2023 here because his party, *Marek Hilšer to the Senate*, was not founded for the purpose of candidacy for the post of head of state but for the upper chamber of the Czech parliament. At the same time, he was indirectly supported by political parties in the election.

6. Non-partisanship heterogeneity in two European regions

In the last analytical part, the results will be evaluated in the context of the different levels of PSI in traditional Western democracies and post-communist Central and Eastern Europe. The following figure demonstrates the difference between these two regions regarding the composition of non-partisans in the dataset.

Figure 6:
Percentage of representation of categories in WE and CEE



Source: own processing; N = 303 (60 not identified)
Note: WE = Western Europe; CEE = Central and Eastern Europe

The results presented in Figure 6 show an unsurprising composition of non-partisan candidates globally. In comparison to Western and post-communist Europe, the results correspond to expectations presented in the theoretical part of the article. However, it is also necessary to mention the existence of a methodological problem in the form of an unclear temporal sequence of political partisanship, when such candidates are classified in the Former partisan category. The first category of strict non-partisans has the significant share in the context of Western Europe. In post-communist countries, partisans predominate. It reveals the fact that candidates with party membership in post-communist Europe want to cover their real status more often. But the proportion of Strict non-partisan is also non-negligible. This fact may be connected to the greater resistance to political parties in new Central and Eastern European democracies represented by lower PSI.

On the other hand, the differences between these two regions are not as significant as can be expected. Although the ranking in terms of percentages is different, the shares of individual categories significantly approach each other. It can be explained by a relatively long period from the democratic transition in the post-communist area. It is followed by a gradual convergence of party sys-

tems in Western and Eastern European countries (Enyedi & Casal Bértoa, 2018, pp. 445–446). It is also necessary to distinguish the level of heterogeneity in post-communist countries. While in Lithuania or Serbia the proportion of strict non-partisans is significant, in Ukraine or Slovakia the proportion of candidates with ties to political parties is significantly higher.

7. Conclusions

The article examined the heterogeneity of the nature of non-partisan presidential candidates in Europe. Although we perceive non-partisans in ordinary communication as people without ties to a political party, the problem is more complex. They often have a party background or are directly or indirectly supported by a political party. Combining the analysis of the biographical characteristics of non-partisan presidential candidates and creating a typology, I tried to clarify the complexity of the topic.

The analysis showed that the question of non-partisan candidacy is more complex than is expected at first glance. The majoritarian electoral system supports non-partisanship in presidential elections, as can be seen in the size of the dataset. In addition, the results showed a possible connection with the crisis of political parties. There are a number of runners for the presidency who want to cover a connection with a party. The significant share in the dataset is Former partisans. This fact is also illustrated in the structure of presidential candidates in the context of biographical characteristics, with a significant share of candidates having political experience and holding high constitutional positions. At the same time, it has been shown that candidates in post-communist Europe showing lower levels of PSI are often people who have ties to a political party, while in Western Europe, Strict non-partisans are more common. However, even within these regions, the situation is not homogeneous. Individual countries in the region differ from each other.

Through a descriptive approach to research and comparisons with the analysis of directly elected presidents (Drašar, 2024), I concluded that the patterns in both groups are close to each other in certain matters. People between forty and fifty-nine years of age predominate among the non-partisan candidates. The most frequently represented candidates are university graduates in social science disciplines, especially economics and law. Compared to elected presidents, there is a more significant increase in candidates who do not have a university degree. The research also showed a significant underrepresentation of women among non-partisan candidates, not only in the sphere of political parties. Somewhat unsurprisingly, in the field of political experience, those who have never held any political office are most often represented. Their cumulative total share is lower than former national politicians (Former partisans).

The purpose of the research was to contribute to the relatively unexplored area of non-partisan candidates at the level of presidential elections, where basic biographical characteristics were presented, and a simple typology was created, despite the claims of some authors about the impossibility of constructing such a classification. The similarity of biographical characteristics and the complexity of the typology show that the usual idea of a non-partisan as a person without ties to a political party is insufficient. Regarding the candidate's party history and political relations, looking at this issue more broadly is necessary. Thus, the research can serve as a 'springboard' for further, more detailed analyses in this area, for example, in a different world region with respect to the absence of universal typology. At the same time, the article brought possible starting points for the research into other aspects. For example, analysing electoral support for these types of candidates not only in the context of social or economic characteristics of the population, but also in comparison to the support for political parties that are connected to them. These studies can be provided not only as case studies, but also in a comparative perspective. The topic is also very important in relation to the crisis of political parties or the personalisation of politics.

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