

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE MODES OF TRANSITION IN HUNGARY AND POLAND AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE ELECTORAL SYSTEMS OF THESE STATES

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Abstract

Although in both Hungary and Poland, the transition to democracy resulted in high levels of democratization, the institutional outcomes of transition were different. This article compares the transition modes of Hungary and Poland and examines the factors which led to different electoral systems. The article concludes that the different transition paths and institutional outcomes were influenced by a combination of two factors: the initial conditions of transition (level of communist' legitimacy, level of social mobilization, relationship of opposition and incumbents) and the strategic behavior of elites involved in the transformation process.

Introduction

In the late 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s in Central Europe a fundamental political change from a party system with one dominant party to a pluralist political system happened. The factor that triggered this change is considered by most of the scholars to be Gorbachev's revision of the URSS European policy.¹ In spite of this, the manner in which communism collapsed and democratization processes were launched and developed differs across the region. This diversity of transitions was mostly determined by two types of variables: initial conditions of transition and the strategic behavior of elites involved in the transformation process.

By initial conditions I refer to historical legacies, culture, level of economical development, level of social awareness, the role of the church in societal life, institutional design of communist states, etc. The interaction of these variables led to different speed, intensity, and outcomes of transition in Central Europe. Since Poland and Hungary are considered to be the most successful examples of both economical and political transition, Slovakia is seen as an "outsider" in democratic consolidation and economical

growth. Moreover, differences can be found between Poland and Hungary, especially in the executive-legislative-judiciary "power triangle" design and different electoral systems (mixed system in Hungary and PR system in Poland). Different institutional outcomes raise the idea of different paths of transition in Hungary and Poland. In my essay I will compare the initial conditions and modes of democratic transitions in Hungary and Poland and depict factors that influenced the choice of different electoral systems.

What does the term "democratic transition" mean?

Before examining concrete modes of transition, it is useful to clarify the concept of *democratic transition*. This concept appears in democratization theory and relates to political transformations in Latin America in the 1970s – 80s. Democratic transformation was viewed as a transition from authoritarian rule toward democracy. Later on, the historical experience of many states in transition that did not reach real democracy or even moved backwards enabled political scientists to review the concept of democratic transition and broaden it by adding a new necessary condition – democratic consolidation. As a result, it can be concluded that democratic transition is a multi-stage process. Summarizing different sequences of transition offered by Rustow (1970), Linz and Stepan (1996) and Agh (1998), the following set of stages can be drawn:

1) First stage – *erosion or pre-transition period* - is characterized by the crisis of the authoritarian regime and appearance of tensions on the one hand between the ruling leadership and oppositional forces, and on the other hand between the ruling hardliners and softliners;

2) Second stage – *breakthrough or democratic transition* — consists of the collapse of the authoritarian regime, the dismantling of old institutions, and the emergence of a new democratic system, with a new institutional structure and new rules of the "political game". This stage ends when the first free elections take place.

3) Third stage – *consolidation* – when the fine-tuning of all societal systems to the new democratic political system happens.

Although all these stages are of scientific interest, in this essay, the focus will be on the first two stages of transition in Hungary and Poland until the first

¹ Stephen White, Judy Batt & Paul G. Lewis (eds.), *Developments in Central and East European Politics 2*, (London: Macmillan, 1998).

democratic “founding” elections (1990 in Hungary and 1991 in Poland).

Initial conditions of transition (pre-transitional period)

The collapse of communism in both Hungary and Poland was preceded by a long period of economical and political transformation implemented by the Communist Party. The incentives for liberalization were induced by the constantly diminishing legitimacy of the Communist Party. The economic crisis faced by Hungary and Poland in the beginning of the 1970s, expressed by shortages and low living standard, came into contradiction with the main goal of communism ideology – to create an ideal welfare society, guaranteeing the citizens “equal rights and access to (economical) benefits”.² The series of workers’ strikes in Poland in the beginning of the 1970s forced the communist regime to adopt reconciliation measures, which relaxed the social policy and opened space for the formation and strengthening of opposition forces. The failure of Gierek’s economical reforms, followed by a new political crisis in 1976,³ only enhanced the political emancipation of the working class.⁴ Prerequisites for the consolidation of civil society from below were created as an opposition force to the communist leadership. This high level of social mobilization later resulted in the birth of the Solidarity movement.

In Hungary, the economical program implemented by Kadar (New Economic Mechanism) improved to some extent the economical situation and redressed the Hungarian Communist Party’s legitimacy. Kadar’s economical reforms and the political relaxation following them resulted in generally stable social support. However, the main achievement of Kadar’s reform was the legalization of the second economy, which offered the citizens a new level of freedom and rationality of the political compromise in dealing with authorities. The relative successes of reforms resulted in the “depoliticization” and “atomization” of society (to some extent), by weakening the oppositional forces and strengthening

the adaptational character of Hungarian society.⁵ Evidence of the consensual pattern adopted by Hungarians during the communist regime can be found in the low level of massive and violent protest actions, which contrasts with Poland in the same period of time. These features of Hungarian society resulted in a weak and disorganized opposition in the transition period.

The second difference between Poland and Hungary lies in different relations between the ruling elites and opposition.⁶ In Poland, the first organized oppositional force – the Solidarity independent trade union – was “born” as a protest movement of workers from the Baltic Shipyards. This fact explains the confrontational model adopted by Solidarity’s leaders later on at the Roundtable negotiations with the ruling party. Even if Solidarity after its emergence acted as an umbrella for other opposition groups, such as students, intellectuals and even former communist members, these new groups were clearly opposition-minded. The “communist/anticommunist” cleavage could represent the nature of relationships between the ruling party and opposition in Poland. On contrary, in Hungary the opposition consisted of intellectuals, from which a part came from the reformative wing of the Hungarian Communist Party. There was never a sharp, irreconcilable gap between opposition forces (weak comparing to the Polish opposition) and the Communist party regarding the reforms to be implemented.⁷ This had an effect on the gradual liberalization of political life in Hungary with parliamentary elections in 1985 having certain competitive provisions, and the emergence in 1987-88 of several proto-parties, which transformed in 1988-1989 to movement parties.⁸

The third main difference between Poland and Hungary in the pre-transition period was the presence of a strong Catholic Church in Poland, which was the only religious institution from the communist block independent from the communist state. Thanks to its independence and authority amongst the Polish population, the Church had a great impact in supporting opposition during the communist regime. It even acted as an ally of the opposition in the settlement of political crises from the 1970s up to the imposition of martial law in 1981.⁹ Since the beginning of the 1980s, the Church had adopted the

² Krzysztof Jasiewicz, “Dead ends and new beginnings: the quest for a procedural republic in Poland”, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, vol. 33 (2000), 101–122.

³ In 1976, Gierek’s government tried to implement new measures to liberalize the economy, which implied an increase of food prices. As a response to price increases, strikes and protest demonstrations occurred in Ursus and Radom. Frightened of the possible spread of popular disobedience throughout the country, the government annulled the liberalization measures.

⁴ Andrew A. Michta, *The Government and Politics of Postcommunist Europe* (Westport, Connecticut, London, 1994).

⁵ Janina Frentzel-Zagorka, “Civil Society in Poland and Hungary”, *Soviet Studies*, vol. 42, issue 4, (Oct., 1990), 759-777.

⁶ Janina Frentzel-Zagorka, *idem.*

⁷ Janina Frentzel-Zagorka, *idem.*

⁸ Atilla Agh, *Emerging Democracies in East Central Europe and the Balkans* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1998).

⁹ According to Korbonksi (1999), the Catholic Church mistrusted the Solidarity, because they believed that this movement displayed some Trotskyite tendencies.

role of negotiator between the authorities and the opposition, recognized as such by both counterparts. Moreover, it should be stressed that it was the Church that managed to convince Solidarity and communist leaders to start the Roundtable negotiations on February 6, 1989. The above-examined differences between Poland and Hungary in the pre-transitional period shaped the actors' behaviours in the transitional period and influenced the modes of transition in these two countries.

The transition period

In both countries, the breakthrough stage bore similar characteristics. The paths to Roundtable negotiations did not differ much either. In both countries, the changeover was preceded by a profound economical crisis and increased popular discontent with the communist regime. This situation yielded to the continuous decline of legitimacy of both Hungarian and Polish Communist parties. In both cases, the communist leaders recognized their inability to redress the economical crisis and, being afraid of carrying the whole responsibility for future economical reforms, were looking for opposition support in achieving "national consensus and cooperation." Moreover, before taking the decision to launch negotiations with the opposition, both Polish and Hungarian ruling parties passed through an internal confrontation between the softliners and the hardliners on the method of bringing about national reconciliation¹⁰.

Another similarity between Hungary and Poland was the identical origin of political change. In Poland, the government was forced to come to an agreement with the opposition after social tensions escalated in a new wave of popular strikes. In Hungary, even if political liberalization was initiated by Kadar's gradual political reforms, the real change of the communist regime did not happen from above, but, as in Poland, from the pressure of "large-scale popular upheaval".¹¹ In both cases, social turmoil precipitated the ascendance of communist reformers, which was followed by the reformation of the entire system.

However, in spite of these similarities, an important difference can be outlined. It is connected to the nature of opposition forces. In Poland, the opposition formed a strong common front under the

umbrella of the Solidarity movement. Even if this cohesion did not last long (only until the early 1990s when the Solidarity movement disintegrated), in negotiations with the communist party Solidarity appeared as a strong, convincing, and popularly legitimated partner. In Hungary, on the contrary, on the eve of the changeover opposition forces were very fragmented, weak, and characterized by a lack of a general message. The weakness of Hungarian opposition motivated the Communist hardliner leaders to attempt to evade the beginning of political reforms and even to make attempts to eliminate emerging independent organizations.¹² It should be mentioned that these efforts had the unexpected effect of mobilizing and radicalizing the opposition.¹³ As result of awkward communist actions, a traditional preference for compromise, distinctive of the Hungarian opposition during the communist era, was replaced in 1989 by a confrontational strategy.

The distinctive character of the opposition in Poland and Hungary determined the motivation and strategies chosen by these forces in their bargaining with the communist party and the institutional outcomes of the Roundtable talks. In Poland, the Roundtable talks between the Polish United Worker's Party (PZPR) and the Solidarity-led opposition started in February 1989.¹⁴ Both counterparts entered into negotiations with clearly-defined motivations. For PZPR, the basic motivation was to calm down the massive strikes, achieve a "social contract" with Solidarity (perceived as a "speaker" of the society), and allowed its representatives to run for Parliament, but at the same time to preserve the communist rule.¹⁵ For Solidarity leaders, the main motivation was the legalization of their trade union. It is important to note that at the opening of the talks, none of the actors were concerned with institutional reform. However, during

¹² Laszlo Bruszt and David Stark, *idem*.

¹³ In May 1989, eight dissident organizations formed a meta-organization "Opposition Round Table" (EKA), which provided a radical attitude towards the Communist Party and pleaded for the total transformation of the system by free elections. The eight parties were: 3 first-generation parties - the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF), a populist conservative party and the largest opposition group; the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ); the Federation of Young Democrats (Fidesz); and the 'historical' political parties - the agrarian Independent Smallholders' Party (MSZDP), the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP), the populist Hungarian People's Party (MNP), and the Hungarian Social Democratic Party (MSZDP).

¹⁴ The Polish Roundtable had also a third part - the hierarchy of Catholic Church that played in the Roundtable talks the role of arbiter.

¹⁵ Kenneth Benoit and Jacqueline Hayden, "Institutional Change and Persistence: The Origins and Evolution of Poland's Electoral System 1989-2001", paper prepared for delivery at the ECPR 2001 General Conference (University of Kent, Canterbury, September 6-8, 2001).

¹⁰ The hardliners pushed for limited liberalization of the state and no democratization. The softliners or communist reformers advocated for the liberalization of civil society.

¹¹ Laszlo Bruszt and David Stark, "Remaking the Political Fiend in Hungary: From the Confrontation to the Politics of Competition", *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 45, No. 1, summer, 1991, 201-245.

discussions the issue of new electoral rules for future semi-free elections arose. As a result, the bargaining focused on the establishment of new electoral institutions and constitutional arrangements. The negotiations outlined several features of the counterparts' strategies, essential for the choice of the Polish electoral system.

First, neither PZPR nor Solidarity rigorously pursued seat-maximizing strategies. Benoit and Hayden note that in the case of Solidarity this fact can be partially explained by the lack of technical knowledge about electoral rules and their outcomes, and the poor self-definition of political parties.¹⁶ Another explanation links the Solidarity attitude with the still-present threat of an outside intervention. But the main reason of such behaviour, according to Benoit and Hayden was Solidarity's lack of interest in the electoral law.¹⁷ The PZPR attitude was the result of the agreement reached with Solidarity that by giving Solidarity a 65-35 seat division, it would not challenge the PZPR right to govern.¹⁸ Moreover, the PZPR was very confident in its popular support and optimistic in its electoral chances.¹⁹ Thus under the effect of this confidence, PZPR consciously reduced its own seat allocation within the *Sejm* in favour of a group of allied parties. The loss of these parties' support after 1990, followed by the dismissal of the communist prime-minister, showed the PZPR miscalculation. Another reason why PZPR paid little attention to electoral design was its straightforward interest in the establishment of the new office of President, which was seen as its guarantee of political power and continuity.²⁰

Secondly, the negotiations followed a consensual model, not characteristic for Solidarity opposition. This change in behavioural patterns – from confrontation to compromise – convinced Solidarity that the Roundtable negotiations were only the first step towards democratization and not a game fixing the rules of a new democratic system. This is why the Solidarity did not argue for totally free and competitive elections, as happened in Hungary, but accepted the holding of semi-free elections for a two-chamber parliament.

The Polish Roundtable talks ended with a pact (known as the April Pact) setting a very peculiar

electoral system and several amendments to the Polish Constitution. According to the new electoral system, 173 out of 460 seats in the *Sejm* were guaranteed to communists, another 126 were allocated to the communists' allies and 161 were openly contested.²¹ All 100 senate seats were openly contested. The system preserved the same majoritarian SMD-runoff electoral formula (Single Member Districts), which was supposed to give the advantage to the communist party. This electoral system did not last long and in 1991 under opposition pressure the "contractual" *Sejm* adopted a new Electoral Law, designed to hold truly competitive elections.²² However, the transitional electoral system played its role. It moved Poland into democratic transition and transformed the Parliament from an obedient assembly into the centre of political decision-making.²³ Moreover, the mistakes in adopting the first electoral system were well-learned by the political parties that emerged from the split of both Solidarity and PZPR. These parties came to the bargaining on the new electoral system with clear interests of survival and/or maximizing their individual representation in the future legislatures, and were strongly oriented to pursue their interests. Consequently, the adoption of a proportional system was seen as an opportunity to compensate their small size and lack of well-known and popular leaders. The proportional system chosen in 1991 governed the first democratic elections, which were considered to be the "founding elections" for the Polish new democratic system. The meaningful result of this system was a genuine multiparty system, a very fragmented legislature, and fragile coalitions which led to unstable government and prolonged political crisis.

In Hungary as well as in Poland, the choice of electoral system took place at the 'National Roundtable' talks held between June and September 1989. Beyond this surface resemblance, the Polish and Hungarian Roundtables talks passed differently. Firstly, in the Hungarian case there were no external constraints that would be able to influence the bargaining, such as in the case of Poland.²⁴ Secondly,

²¹ Atilla Agh, *idem*.

²² The impressive victory of the Solidarity candidates in the 1990 parliamentary elections led to the formation of a "contractual parliament", where the opposition forces gained increasing influence. However, because of the Roundtable arrangements, the opposition within the parliament did not have a free hand to adopt more radical political reforms. The election of the first non-communist government only stressed the disagreement between the new political reality and the institutional structure formed by the April pact.

²³ David M. Olson, *idem*.

²⁴ Kenneth Benoit and John W. Shiemann, "Institutional Choice in New Democracies. Bargaining over Hungary's 1989 Electoral Law", *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, vol. 13 (2), 2001, 153-182.

¹⁶ Kenneth Benoit and Jacqueline Hayden, *idem*.

¹⁷ Kenneth Benoit and Jacqueline Hayden, *idem*.

¹⁸ David M. Olson, "Compartmentalized Competition: The Managed Transitional Election System in Poland," *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 55, issue 2 (May, 1993), 415-444.

¹⁹ Kenneth Benoit and Jacqueline Hayden, *idem*.

²⁰ David M. Olson, *idem*.

the unified opposition (after passing over all their discrepancies in the “Opposition Roundtable”), embraced a competition model of negotiations.²⁵ Contrary to Solidarity, the Hungarian opposition had a clear goal - to adopt an electoral system that would maximize its representation in the future legislature. This goal was important since the parliamentary elections were coming. Furthermore, the communist regime’s attempts to destroy the opposition forced the latter to unite their forces and maintain a common front against the regime in promoting their individual preferences. The opposition parties were aware that only in this way would some of them be able to overcome their weak features, such as a low level of legitimacy and the lack of membership and well-known leaders.

Thirdly, both the incumbent Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party (MSZMP) and the opposition possessed considerable knowledge about the electoral systems and their consequences for political actors, and were constantly informed about the public opinion on party preferences.²⁶ This fact allowed the actors to assess their election chances and avoid deadlocks in negotiation. It is important to note in particular that the independent opinion survey published in August 1989, compelled the MSZMP negotiators to reconsider their stance on the acceptance of the mixed system proposed by the opposition.²⁷

The Roundtable negotiations in Hungary used as a departure point the SMD majoritarian system, proposed and favoured by MSZMP. The major part of the opposition pushed for the introduction of a proportional system. Consensus was reached by the acceptance of a complicated mixed-member system, a “hybrid” of majoritarian single-member districts (SMDs) system and a multi-member list proportional representation system. This decision established an electoral system unique for Eastern Europe. Reached after a long and meticulous bargaining process, this system provided an institutional basis for the political change in Hungary. Moreover, even if it is not perfect, it proved to be efficient by providing a stable institutions equilibrium.

Conclusion

Even if Hungary and Poland both reached high levels of democratization in comparison with other states in Central Europe, their paths towards this

achievement were different. Two types of variables determined the difference in their modes of transition from a party system with one dominant party to a pluralist political system: the initial conditions of transition (level of communist’ legitimacy, level of social mobilization, relationship of opposition incumbents) and strategic behavior of elites involved in the transformation process.

In the pre-transition period, Poland and Hungary offered two different pictures: in Poland – a polarized and active society that embraced a confrontational model of negotiations with the communist regime – there were strong, but not consolidated opposition forces, supported in their demands for political and economical liberalization by the Catholic Church. In Hungary, there was a “depoliticized” and “atomized” society and weak opposition forces ready to compromise with the ruling party. These distinctive conditions influenced the Polish and Hungarian period of political transition from the fall of the authoritarian regime and the dismantling of old institutions to the emergence of the new democratic system (with a new institutional structure and new rules of the “political game”). As this work shows, the institutional outcomes of this period were greatly determined by the motivations and strategies chosen by the communists and opposition forces during the bargaining over the new institutional structure. Aware of its weaknesses, the Hungarian unified opposition adopted a competition model during negotiations with the ruling party and constantly followed a seat-maximizing strategy in bargaining over the electoral system. In contrast, the Polish Solidarity-led opposition movement came to the negotiations without any strategy regarding the electoral law, looking only for its re-legalization. As a consequence, after Roundtable talks two different electoral systems emerged: a mixed-member system in Hungary and SMD-majoritarian system in Poland, which after a year, under the pressure of opposition, was changed to the proportional representation system.

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²⁵ Laszlo Bruszt and David Stark, *idem*.

²⁶ Starting with May and during the entire Roundtable period, several opinion polls were organized by both independent and state institutes.

²⁷ Kenneth Benoit and John W. Shiemann, *idem*.

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