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**On the reasons for the stability of the Hungarian multi-  
party system 1990-2010**

**Theses of Doctoral Dissertation**

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## **I. The reasons for the choice of the topic, the objectives of the dissertation**

In Hungary since the 1989-90 regime change a total of seven different parties have crossed the parliamentary threshold in the first five general elections, and six of these were the parties that won the first election to the legislature. As a result, the Hungarian multi-party system seemed almost irredeemable, with five parties crossing the 5% threshold in the fifth general election in spring 2006, all of which had crossed the 4% threshold in 1990. Obviously, the vote shares of the five parties that won the first general election were significantly different in subsequent elections compared to the results in 1990.

The range of parties involved in the various government coalitions was even more stable than the range of parties being able to cross the parliamentary threshold. A total of six parties have been members of the various government coalitions since the spring of 1990; those six parties that had already entered parliament in the first general election.

Today's Hungarian multi-party system has by far been the most stable multi-party system in the post-communist region of East-Central Europe since the regime change around 1990. In the region, there was greater variability in the number of parties entering the legislature in the twenty years under study. In addition, in previous historical periods of Hungary, when a multi-party system was in place, there was also greater party turnover. One only has to think of the period between the two world wars, when, along with the best-known parties of the time (the United Party, the Hungarian Social Democratic Party, etc.), a number of parties won seats in legislative elections.

Among the parties that crossed the parliamentary threshold, the 1998 and 2010 general elections brought a change. In 1998, the national radical MIÉP was the first and until 2010 the last party to cross the 5% parliamentary threshold. However, this change was only temporary, as MIÉP did not make it to the 2002 elections, and in both the 2002 and 2006 general elections the parties that crossed the 5% threshold and entered parliament had already been able to cross the 4% threshold in the 1990 general elections. The 2010 general election brought a major change in the number of parties entering parliament, with two new parties crossing the threshold. However, the two former leading forces of the regime change (MDF and SZDSZ) were eliminated. In other words, the Hungarian party system partially renewed. The 2010 elections provided the inspiration for this doctoral dissertation.

For the aforementioned reasons, I sought to answer the following research question in my thesis: what were the reasons for the stability of the number of parties that could cross the

legislative threshold in the Hungarian multi-party system from the 1990 general parliamentary elections until the 2010 general parliamentary elections?

I would also like to make it clear that this doctoral thesis is not intended to qualify the stability in question. My aim is not to describe it as a good or a bad, a useful or a harmful property, my aim is solely to seek, describe and understand the causes.

## II. The methodology used in this dissertation

Reviewing the literature on the subject, I came to the conclusion that there is no developed methodology or framework for the question I want to investigate.

I have also found that the topic I am looking at is limited in space and time, as it deals with only one country, and only its party system in a twenty-year time frame, during which there were six general elections, and only thirty of the parties running in those elections will be discussed. Therefore, I have used a qualitative methodology for this thesis.

I have done this because qualitative methods can be used to great advantage in research situations where theories are not yet fully developed and concepts are uncertain. Qualitative methods are often applied to cases that cannot be approached by conventional, quantitative methods. Questions about historically or culturally important phenomena require empirical categories that are limited in space and time and thus contain a finite, usually small, number of known examples. It is very difficult to meet the conditions and requirements of quantitative methods in situations with a small number  $N$  of examples.<sup>1</sup>

In my research, I used the perspective approach, which means that the researcher builds a combined package of variables derived from the main theoretical set of empirical literature, i.e. the researcher reviews the research methods and then designs a research model that takes into account the widest possible range of factors. At the same time, it also determines how to decide between competing explanations and the interaction effects allowed between certain factors.<sup>2</sup>

For these reasons, by taking the theories on the stability of party systems into account, a separate analytical framework has been developed.

The different factors and theoretical lines of investigation are presented in the main chapters of the dissertation.

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<sup>1</sup> Ragin, Charles C. – Berg-Schlosser, Dirk – de Meur, Gisèle 1996. 750. o.; Ragin, Charles C. – Berg-Schlosser, Dirk – de Meur, Gisèle 2003. 713. o.;

<sup>2</sup> Ragin, Charles C. – Berg-Schlosser, Dirk – de Meur, Gisèle 1996. 753-754. o.; Ragin, Charles C. – Berg-Schlosser, Dirk – de Meur, Gisèle 2003. 716-717. o.; Barakso, Maryann – Sabet, Daniel M. – Schaffner, Brian F. 2014. 178. o.;

### **III. The structure of the dissertation**

Chapter A of the dissertation contains the aim of the thesis, the research question and the timeline of the topic. It also defines the key terms used in the thesis. The remainder of the chapter reviews the Hungarian and international literature on the topic and, on this basis, defines the methodology and the research framework. At the end of chapter A, I also define the parties that will be examined in the course of the dissertation.

The short chapter B of the dissertation reviews the most important features of the Hungarian system of government between 1990 and 2010.

Chapter C of the dissertation reviews the history of the current Hungarian multi-party system from its establishment in the late 1980s until the formation of the 2nd Orbán government. In the historical part, I try to concentrate on the most important junctions in the development of the party system and the most important stages in the history of the thirty parties under study. The main purpose of this chapter of the thesis is to support the analysis in the further chapters.

Chapter D of the dissertation is devoted to the typification of the parties and the party system. I classify the parties mainly according to ideological centres, party families and their origins. For the typology of the party system I use Giovanni Sartori's typology. Separately, I classify the period 1988-2010 and the period after 2010. Based on these, I can conclude that before 2010, a moderately plural multiparty system was operating in our country, while since 2010 a predominant multiparty system has been operating. This also proves that the 2010 general parliamentary elections can be considered a real epochal turning point in the history of the current Hungarian multi-party system.

Chapter E of the dissertation examines the effects of the parliamentary electoral system applied between 1990 and 2010 on the party system, looking separately at the different branches of the mandate acquisition and the candidate supply system.

Chapter F of the dissertation examines the Hungarian voter behaviour. I examine the participation in elections, the range of participants, and the fluctuation of votes cast for each party between 1990 and 2010 in two separate subsections.

Chapter G examines the Hungarian political culture and its impact on the Hungarian multi-party system. Here I begin with a description of political culture going back to the 19th century and review it up to the regime change of 1989-90. For the purposes of my topic, I considered it essential to describe the social structure after 1990, which I also do in this chapter. After the two aforementioned sub-chapters, I present the Hungarian political culture after 1990 and determine its impact on the Hungarian multi-party system.

Chapter H of my thesis looks at the political cleavages in Hungary. There is far from a unanimous view on the cleavages determining the Hungarian domestic politics, neither in the Hungarian nor in the international political science. In this section, I try to synthesise the overlapping theories and to define a concept of cleavages that will help me to carry out my analysis. Then, based on this concept, I will place the parties under analysis along the defined cleavages.

In Chapter J, I present additional factors that affect the competitive position of the parties under study:

- the impact of the formation of parties on their competitive position
- the circumstances and reasons for the formation of certain parties
- the impact of having a parliamentary group on their competitive position
- the impact of state budgetary support
- the impact of the number of members and the organisational strength of the parties
- factors affecting their specific competitive position: membership of the EKA-NEKA, succession to the MSZMP, historical parties, integration capacity

Chapter K is a brief look at a side result, the reasons for the transformation of the party system in 2010.

The final part L contains the conclusions of the dissertation.

## **IV. The conclusions of the dissertation**

In the course of the presentation of the system of state organisation, it was established that there were no significant changes in its framework and nature. Hungary is a unitarian state. The legislature is unicameral, which is why it is at the centre of public life, and the attention paid to it is not divided in the same way as in bicameral systems. Overall, institutional relations also reinforce governmental stability. These factors also had a stabilising effect on the Hungarian party system.

In the history section we can see that stable coalition and alliance patterns emerged between the parties. It was because of these strong coalition patterns that there were no snap elections in Hungary during the period under study. These factors significantly contributed to the stability of the party system.

In the chapter on the typification of the party system, it has been proven that the 2010 parliamentary elections can be considered an epochal turning point in the history of the Hungarian multi-party system working since 1988.

Based on Giovanni Sartori's typology of the party system, the Hungarian multi-party system was a moderate plural multi-party system after the 1990 general parliamentary elections, and then, after the 2010 general parliamentary elections, it was transformed into a predominant multi-party system.

The electoral system used between 1990 and 2010 contributed to the stability of the party system in several ways, and selected the parties running for election in several ways.

The nomination phase was already a major constraint for the parties, as those who did not have the organisational strength and could not submit individual candidates in a significant majority of single-member constituencies, had no chance of crossing the parliamentary threshold.

The disadvantages of organisational weaknesses were compounded for some parties by the fact that they did not even understand the nomination system and were not aware, for example, of the importance of having a regional list in every county and also in Budapest. This was therefore the second selection factor, as parties that could not field 20 out of 20 regional lists had no chance of crossing the parliamentary threshold. Of the parties included in



the analysis, the following parties failed to produce 20 out of 20 regional lists and therefore had no chance of crossing the parliamentary threshold: CM, EKGP, EMU, KP, KDP, MCF-RÖP, MDNP, MNP, MSZDP, MVPP, MZP, NDSZ, NF, ÚBP, ÚSZM, VP.

The third selective factor was the parliamentary threshold of four to five percent, the existence of which had a clear stabilising effect on the Hungarian party system.

It is also determined that the electoral system used between 1990 and 2010 was characterised by majority elements and therefore it clearly contributed to the emergence of stable government majorities after each general election. This also had a stabilising effect on the Hungarian multi-party system.

Thus, the paper also clearly demonstrated that in the parliamentary election system applied between 1990 and 2010, not only the single-member constituency branch distorted proportionality, but also the regional list branch, as we have seen that the implicit thresholds in eighteen of the regional list districts were higher than the nationally determined threshold.

The section on voter behaviour showed that the parties that crossed the parliamentary threshold in the first general election were much more likely to appeal to voters who migrated between parties than their challengers, supporting Zsolt Enyedi's observation.<sup>3</sup> This, of course, significantly contributed to stability.

The other conclusion that can be drawn from voter behaviour is that, as we have seen, parties were unable to reach 30-40% of the electorate in the general parliamentary elections, and of these, 10-15% were voters who had never voted in a general election, so they were completely turned off. This also reinforced stability.

It was also found that the Hungarian political culture is characterised by pejorative thinking about political parties, by political cynicism and individualism. Since the functioning of a party requires group behaviour and members who can identify with the parties, there are few who participate in the work of the parties, and few who become members.

The success of a party also depends to a large extent on the number and quality of its staff.

On the one hand, the above mentioned facts favoured parliamentary parties over non-parliamentary ones, as their dominance tended to siphon off those inclined to work in political parties. A parliamentary party receives state support and can maintain its own apparatus. A

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<sup>3</sup> Enyedi Zsolt 2006a. 225. o.; Enyedi Zsolt 2004a. 128–129. o.;

party with a sustained popularity above the parliamentary threshold is much more likely to have a political career, and to have people who work for that win elected office, with a salary or honorarium.

Due to the dominance of parliamentary parties and the negative perception of parties, new entrants suffer from a serious lack of human resources. Not only in the field of activists, but often even in the field of parliamentary candidates who are very difficult to find.

The range of NGOs is not well-developed either, presumably because of the atomization of society, and this does not provide a good breeding ground for parties in terms of human resources.

The former contributed to the phenomenon that the range of parties in parliament remained very stable between 1990 and 2010.

However, the lack of human resources, regardless of the competitive situation, does not favour the recruitment function of political parties, as it is often difficult for them to find suitable candidates to fill the positions they have chosen. This also had a negative effect on the fact that people who are not suitable for a political career could even end up in parliament. A scandal caused by an inadequately selected politician can further reinforce negative opinions about the political elite or even about political parties, and can have a negative impact on the image and popularity of a party.

The punitive attitude of the citizenry, which is characteristic of the Hungarian political culture, favoured the bipolar party system and the concentration of the party system, as some voters voted for the party that was most likely to defeat the party they disliked. This further strengthened the stability of the range of parties that made up the Hungarian party system.

The way citizens experienced different historical periods, especially the period of state socialism, also had a stabilising effect, as individual voters were choosing parties in this context. Because of nostalgia for the Kádár system, many expected the return of the sense of relative prosperity associated with it from the MSZP as the successor party to the state party, while those who had negative experiences of the Kádár system voted for the party or parties they thought most likely to defeat the MSZP.

The failure of the Romani population in awakening their political consciousness also had a significant stabilising effect on the Hungarian multi-party system. On the one hand, as we have seen, although we do not have precise data on their numbers in Hungary, they are the only ethnic group which, if it were able to form a united group and become politically conscious, would be able to send an ethnically based party to the legislature. Even the lowest

estimates put the number of Romani population in Hungary at half a million at least, and just over 280,000 votes would have been enough to cross the five per cent threshold in parliament.

In the section on cleavages, it was established that the cleavage system in Hungary was shaped by the differences between parties and political elites, rather than by conflicts in society. Thus, neither the Lipset-Rokkan concept of cleavages nor the Bartolini-Mair definition of cleavages can be fully applied to the Hungarian multiparty system.

It also became clear that in Hungary since the mid-nineties, a cleavage, the traditionalist-westernising opposition, had structured the political divide.

And once the parties were placed on either side of this cleavage, it became clear that those parties that could be placed along this cleavage had a chance of crossing the parliamentary threshold.

Conor O'Dwyer's thesis, according to which the most stable party systems are those where parties compete along a fundamental dimension, proved to be true.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the emergence of a fundamental cleavage in Hungary, the traditionalist-westernising cleavage, also had a stabilising effect on the Hungarian multi-party system.

The fact that the political structure was determined in the long term by the elites who created the various parties also brought considerable stability to the system.

Parties that failed to cross the legislative threshold in the second general election after their formation at the latest were definitively out of the running.

The creation of breakaway parties usually ended in failure, so in Hungary it was not worthwhile for the actors to cause party splits. This also promoted stability.

Parties unable to cross the parliamentary threshold on their own were not worth joining a common electoral alliance (Centrum, EMU, etc.), because this did not improve their chances of getting into Parliament.

The success of parties depends not only on how many members they have, but also on how much organisational coverage they have in Hungary.

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<sup>4</sup> O'Dwyer, Conor 2014. 521. o.;

The parties had no chance of getting into parliament without adequate funding, but it is also clear that it was not just funding that made them successful.

In practice, the range of parties that had a chance to get into parliament was decided by who could take part in the National Round Table negotiations, since participation in these negotiations gave them national visibility. We saw that already in the first general parliamentary elections, the parties that won seats in the legislature had a significant competitive advantage over the other parties. On the one hand, the very fact that they became the parliamentary parties further enhanced their visibility, and on the other hand, they were able to form parliamentary groups, which gave them additional organisational and financial resource, and also visibility advantage. All of this strengthened stability.

MSZP's existence as a successor party also brought stability to the party system, as it had the competitive advantage of being the most entrenched party, the "main beneficiary" of nostalgia for the resurgent Kádár regime, it gained a significant competitive advantage from its social and economic connections being the successor party, and had a more experienced political cadre than any other party. Because of these advantages, it was the strongest party on one political pole during the period covered by this dissertation, effectively blocking the chance of other parties representing the left in the legislature.

The alliance-building strategy of the MSZP and Fidesz also had a stabilising effect, as both parties sought to make the parties close to their ideology their allies, thus reducing the number of parties that could cross the parliamentary threshold.

The former factors not only contributed to the stability of the Hungarian multi-party system between 1990 and 2010, but also reinforced each other.

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