

## Extremist Parties in East Central Europe during post-communist transformation process

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Political extremism in the post-communist area was one of the very important problems during the transition period to democracy after the fall of communism. The new political regimes tried to eliminate threats to their stability and security. Within the political spectrum of the post-communist societies various extremist forces were and are active with anti-democratic goals, including political parties and their satellite organizations. In various regions their influence on transition to democracy was very different.

This paper is focused on the framework and basic analysis of the party organized political extremism in the East Central European area. The states of East Central Europe are mostly evaluated as successful examples of democratic development, despite the fact that many difficulties are still connected with the totalitarian legacy of the regimes on their territories in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As East Central European Countries we understand in this paper Hungary, Slovenia, Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and specifically also the former German Democratic Republic, which has been since 1990 a part of the re-unified Germany.

With the exception in Slovakia in 1994-1998, all these countries aimed at the establishing a stabilized democracy without strong anti-democratic tendencies. All the countries have been members of the European Union (since 2004, only Eastern Germany since 1990) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Eastern Germany since 1990, the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary since 1999 and Slovakia and Slovenia since 2004). The democratic regimes in all the countries could be designated as stabile, despite the presence of extremist parties and movements in the political systems.

The aim of the paper is to explain the role of the historical legacy in relation to the character of extremism after 1989, the strategy of the extremist parties, the impact of the extremist parties on the party systems and the impact of legal and political measures against extremist parties on the development of democracy and extremism (including the change of identity of extremist parties to non-extremist parties).

## 2. Conceptualizing of political extremism in post-communist Europe

The term “extremism” was nothing new in East Central European area after the fall of communism. During the pre-war or during the communist era there were some political forces designated as extremists by the regime rulers, however, without a clear specification of the term. In the post-communist period the term “extremism” has been very popular, also in relation to the contemporary situation in Western Europe.

Basically we can find three basic models of conceptualizing of extremism:

- a) extraordinary, excessive and intolerant political opinion, belief or activity<sup>1</sup>;
- b) violent political activity;
- c) activity aimed against the democratic constitutional state (in this sense this term is used also by the German mainstream of extremism research, mostly by Uwe Backes and Eckhard Jesse)<sup>2</sup>.

The term extremism is used in various milieus, mostly:

- a) in the context of political competition (as a defamation term against political enemies);
- b) in the media (usually for a brief labeling and/or sometimes also for a defamation of a subject);
- c) in official governmental documents, in some countries also in law documents (usually for labeling of anti-regime forces);
- d) in social sciences (for the exact labeling of some subjects).

The term extremism can be found in the East Central European countries in the all above mentioned dimensions. It was officially defined by the governments (mostly by security forces) in several post-communist countries, inspired mainly by the West German model. It is typical of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and, of course, of the former GDR area.

In this paper the term extremism is used as an anti-thesis of the democratic constitutional state. In usual the political science typology the political extremism exists in the both basic variants – right wing extremism (this extremism is against human equality and in this sense against democratic rule) and left wing extremism (due to absolute equality it is against

individual freedom as an integral part of democracy). The other variants of extremism are religious extremism (theocracy and religious intolerance against democratic principles and values), ethnic extremism (intolerant no-democratic activities of ethnic minorities) or environmental extremism (non-democratic activities in the name of “ecocracy”).

All types of extremism can be in democratic societies represented by:

- a) political parties;
- b) movement interest groups;
- c) youth subcultures.<sup>3</sup>

There are many concepts of the transformation of political regimes or of the democratization (transition from non democratic system to democracy). In East Central Europe it is very simple to identify 3 basic phases:

1. The fall of communism and the defining of democratic orientation (in Slovenia and Slovakia also the establishing of the own state) (1989-1992);
2. Socio-economic transition und building of stabile democracy (the 90's);
3. Europeanization (the approximation of Western European values and experience from the post-war development) (the begin of the new millennium).

After the fall of communism the first problems with extremism were connected with the legacy of the former state-parties of the communist regimes. The wave of nationalism also caused the rise of the right-wing extremist parties and movements in post-communist area. The right wing extremism became a relevant part of the post-communist political spectrum. In some countries ethnic extremist subjects can also be found, however, in East Central Europe not on party level. The conceptualizing of religious extremism was in East Central Europe in the 90' s mostly connected with non partisan small cults and new religious movements, recently the problem of rising Islamic extremism is also visible in this area (up to now not on party level). The green parties in this area have no extremist identity<sup>4</sup>.

During the time of the post-communist transformation extremism played an important role. According to German political scientist Klaus von Beyme the (non)presence of strong extremism is one of the important criteria of democratic consolidation<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand, the rise of extremism could be a start of the de-consolidation of democracy. However, the presence of extremist parties and movements with limited (and sometimes with rising) influence is also for many established democracies a typical event. In this sense the existence of extremism in the post-communist regimes is mainly the first traditional element of societies in transition and later “normal pathology” of some democratic regimes<sup>6</sup>.

### 3. Historical legacy of the extremist parties

The traditions and legacies of extremism have a significant influence on the presence and the acceptance of extremism in post-communist societies. Within some parts of society long time models of mentality, behavior and beliefs with connection to historical forms of extremism are living, despite the possible modification during the historical development.

Generally extremism can be connected with the last non-democratic regimes before the start of democratization (link communist regimes –communist parties in post-communist era) or with other historical non-democratic regimes (link fascist regimes in the 30-40's – neo-fascist parties) or extremism could be a new event without historical tradition.

The role of historical knowledge and organized right-wing extremist opposition groups against communist regimes was an important part for the transmission of traditional right-wing extremism in the post-communist societies. In several cases (Hungary, Slovakia, Poland) parts of diasporas of emigrants in Western countries played a significant role. However, the rise of specific new right wing parties which were oriented against the new establishment was not determined by strong traditions of historical fascism (typical is the rise of the Republicans in the Czech Republic in the 90's). An individual case is Eastern Germany with the extension of activities of the West German right-wing extremist parties on the territory of the former GDR<sup>7</sup>.

The communist regimes in some East Central European countries tried to realize (at least in the 80's) a specific "national way" of communism, with a specific distance towards the Soviet Union and its model of communism (Poland, Hungary) or towards Serbian supremacy in former Yugoslavia (Slovenia). In these countries it was easier to change the identity of the former communist state-parties into the new "socialdemocratized" parties. In the states with strong respect to the traditional Soviet model of socialism the reforms were only limited (the GDR, the Czech Republic). Slovakia is a specific case with a mixture of both the processes.

In Hungary the tradition of communist regime was connected with the uprising in 1956 and its brutal suppression by Soviet forces in 1956 on one hand, and with era of "goulash communism" in the 70' and 80's on the other hand. The fall of the communist regime was a result of agreements between the regime and the democratic opposition. The Hungarian Socialist Workers Party (*Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt – MSZMP*) with communist identity has dissolved itself without legal successor in 1989 and the new Hungarian Socialist Party (*Magyar Szocialista Párt – MSZP*) with socialist identity was founded at the same time. The rise of right-wing extremism in Hungary was partially connected with the traditions of

historical legacy of the right-wing authoritarian regime in the 20-40's (including irredentism), however, also traditional nationalism with roots in 19<sup>th</sup> century and new anti-transformation populism played a role.

Slovenian legacy of domestic communism was interconnected with separatist anti-Yugoslavian demands in the late 80's. The League of Communists of Slovenia (*Zveza komunistov Slovenjse*) transformed itself first in 1990 into the Party of the Democratic Reform (*Stranka demokratične prenove*) and after a long-time development it was transformed into the party Social Democrats (*Socialni Demokrati*). The historical legacy of Slovenian nationalism was a base for the establishing of the new right-wing extremism in the independent state<sup>8</sup>.

Poland had a tradition of the national way of communism and a strong anti-communist movement, mostly in the 80's. The transformation into a social democratic party of was a logical step in the Polish environment. The Polish United Workers Party (*Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza - PZRP*) ended its existence in 1990. The new Social Democracy of the Polish Republic (*Socjaldemokracja Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej – SdRP*) was founded in 1990 and in 1991 it joined the broad leftist coalition Democratic Left Alliance (*Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej – SLD*). This coalition was later transferred into a political party<sup>9</sup>. The tradition of authoritarian regime in Poland in the 30's and the tradition of ultranationalist groupings from this time were important for the rise of the Polish extreme right, as well as the traditional nationalist and dogmatic religious (mainly catholic) politics.

In Slovakia the communist regime was connected with the socioeconomic rise on the one hand, and with the suppression of traditionally strong religion (mainly catholic) on the other hand. Opposition against Czech dominancy in the federal state was also visible. The rename of the Communist Party of Slovakia (*Komunistická strana Slovenska - KSS*) into the Party of Democratic Left (*Strana demorkatickej ľavice – SDL*) and a long time “socialdemocratization” were results of a strong presence of communist reformists in the party leadership during the first part of transformation. The traditions of authoritarian streams of Slovak autonomism from the 30s' and the legacy of the Slovak state with clero-fascist regime from 1939-1945.

The traditional strong position of communism in the Czech lands led after 1989 to the fact that communist party has not changed the word “communist” in its name<sup>10</sup>. Up to now the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (*Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy – KSČM*) is keeping its communist identity, despite some limited reforms in its program. The weak traditions of the Czech inter-war fascism, the authoritarian right-wing regime from 1938-1939

and collaboration with German Nazi occupants from 1939-1945 had after 1989 impact only on a limited number of activists, mostly in sub-cultural environment.

After the fall of Berlin wall in Eastern Germany the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* - SED) was renamed to the Party of Democratic Socialism (*Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus* – PDS). The dogmatic communist parties from Western Germany came into the new federal states. The West German right-wing extremism expanded into Eastern Germany, where a youth neonazi sub-cultural milieu existed since the end of 80's.

#### 4. Impact of extremist parties on the transformed party systems

The extremist political parties in East Central European countries have a different position within various political systems and this position has changed during the various stages of transformation (which was connected with Europeanization at least since the end of the 90's). Also the relation between the left wing extremist parties and right wing extremist parties was very different in regional and temporal comparison.

During the the 90's the right wing extremist Party of Hungarian Justice and Life (*Magyar Igazság és Élet Pártja* – MIÉP) can be designated as a relevant extremist party. It kept its parliamentary position from 1998 to 2002. Currently Hungarian right wing extremists are not represented in parliament. The most visible extra-parliamentary formation is the Movement for a Better Hungary (*Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom*). The dogmatic communists were and are not relevant a part of the Hungarian political spectrum. Today they are represented by the weak Hungarian Communist Workers' Party (*Magyar Kommunista Munkáspárt* – MKMP).

In Slovenia the extreme right Slovenian National Party (*Slovenska Nacionalna Stranka* – SNS) kept its parliamentary position since 1992 (in this election it was most successful with 10,02% of the votes, in the last election in 2004 it won 6,3%)<sup>11</sup>. The dogmatic extreme left Communist party of Slovenia (*Komunistična Partija Slovenije* – KPS) is a very marginal grouping without real influence on the party system.

In Poland in the 90's left wing extremists as well as right wing extremists were without own parliamentary representation. The rise of the extreme right in Poland started in Poland in 2001, probably in relation with planning the entrance of Poland into the European Union. The fundamental religious League of Polish Families (*Liga Polskich Rodzin* – LPR) and populist Self-defense (Samoobrona) won parliamentary position in 2001 and in 2005 they entered the

government<sup>12</sup>, however, after many problems the Polish governmental coalition crashed in 2007. In the election in the same year the LPR and the Samoobrona lost their parliamentary representation. The dogmatic communists were and are in Poland without real influence on the party system, including the Communist Party of Poland (*Komunistyczna Partia Polski - KPP*)

In Slovakia the Slovak National Party (*Slovenská národná strana – SNS*) was first in the position of a separatist party within the Czechoslovak party system. After the split of Czechoslovakia it occupied the extreme right position within the independent Slovak party system. It was successful and between 1990-2002 and since 2006 it kept its parliamentary position. It was a member of two governmental coalitions.

The dogmatic Communist Party of Slovakia (*Komunistická strana Slovenska – KSS*) was newly founded in 1991 by dogmatic communists who were not satisfied with the reform of the own KSS towards social democracy. This “new” KSS remained outside of parliament to 2002, however, after four years it lost parliamentary position in 2006<sup>13</sup>.

In the Czech Republic the right-wing extremist Assembly for Republic – Republican Party of Czechoslovakia (*Sdružení pro republiku – Republikánská strana Československa - SPR-RSČ*) entered Parliament in 1992 and lost this position in 1992. Since this time the extreme right in the Czech Republic has fragmented into several small parties and has no parliamentary representation. The most visible right-wing extremist parties are the National Party (*Národní strana – NS*) and the Workers Party (*Dělnická strana - DS*)<sup>14</sup>. The Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (*Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy - KSČM*) keeps a relevant position with electoral results between 10-20% of the votes. The reform splits as well as more dogmatic splits from the KSČM are marginal<sup>15</sup>.

In Eastern Germany the right-wing extremist parties were not successful during the 90's. Only in one German new federal state, Saxony-Anhalt, the German Peoples Union (*Deutsche Volksunion - DVU*) won in 1998 regional parliamentary mandates (12,9%). The success at regional level in the new millennium was typical of the DVU in Brandenburg in 2004 (6,1%) and of the the neonazi National Democratic Party of Germany (*Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands - NPD*) in Saxony 2004 (9,2%) as well in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern in 2006 (7,3%)<sup>16</sup>.

The reformed left wing PDS was more successful than the extreme right. It occupied about 20% within the East German party landscape. At least in some factions the party had a left wing extremist character. Intra-party left wing extremist factions exist also within the Left Party (*Linkspartei*), which has its representation in federal parliament. The Left Party is a

fusion of the PDS with one split from the Social Democratic Party of Germany. The more dogmatic communist parties are marginal in Germany.

In relation to the above mentioned positions of various parties in the party system it is not possible to make a common model of the role of the extremist parties within the transformation process in East Central Europe. The first phase of transformation in the 90's was connected with social un-security and this situation caused the rise of extremism in this area (with the exception of Poland), however, the forms and determinants of the existence of extremism were different.

Generally we can say that right-wing extremists are more successful than left wing extremists in Slovenia, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland, contradictory cases are the Czech Republic and partially Eastern Germany. In all the countries it is not a problem to distinguish the right-wing extremist and left wing extremist spectrum, despite the fact that strong patriotism is interconnected with politics of many communist parties.

After the fragmentation of the political spectrum the right wing extremist subjects occupied in the 90's a relevant position in Hungary, Slovenia, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Only in Slovenia the presence of the right wing extremist party in parliament is consequent, in Slovakia it broke up and in Hungary and the Czech Republic it ended. In Poland and partially in Eastern Germany the rise of the extreme right parties was connected with the final phase of transformation, respectively with the process of Europeanization.

A strong position of the non reformed communist party is characteristic mostly of the Czech Republic. In Eastern Germany the Marxist-Leninist faction works within the relevant extreme left party. In other countries, where the former state-parties of the communist regimes were by various ways "socialdemocratized, the dogmatic communist splits play only a marginal role in the party systems. In Slovakia the presence of the KSS in parliament in 2002-2006 was an extra-ordinary event, however, in the future the return of this party into parliament is not excluded.

## 5. Strategy of extremist parties

Political extremists enforced their goals during the transition to democracy by various ways and means. There exists no common extremist strategy in the East Central European area. The left wing extremist parties used in their propaganda the positive evaluation of social policy of the former communist regimes and they attacked the new political establishment. They

opposed strongly against the socioeconomic transformation. Later they had a mainly negative attitude towards Europeanization because of the alleged capitalist character of the EU.

The right-wing extremists in East Central Europe rejected the legacy of communism, with the exception of various national benefits from the communist era or from the era directly before the establishing of the communist regimes (a. o. the defense of Polish eastern territories on former German territory by the Polish extreme right or a positive evaluation of the transfer of German population from Czech territory after WW II by the Czech SPR-RSČ).

They tried to defame the new democratic elite as a “the same as communists” or even as allies of communists (a. o. because of a high number of former communists in the new democratic parties). The right wing extremists rejected the form of the socioeconomic transition and they used populist arguments in this political field. A very important part of their propaganda was a negative attitude towards some national minorities (mostly Roma in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary), in some countries (Hungary, Slovenia, partially Eastern Germany) they have also irredentist demands. The strong anti-irredentism was typical of Poland, the Czech Republic (in both countries against German irredentism) and Slovakia (against Hungarian irredentism). The right-wing extremists rejected the Europeanization because of alleged the “anti-national” character of the EU.

Despite the rejection of the new political establishment the extremist parties tried to take part in the executive. The dogmatic communists were not a relevant partner with the exception of the Czech Republic. The only relevant possible partner of the Czech communists – the Czech Social Democratic Party – in 1995 in the so called “Bohumín resolution” (named after the city of the party congress) rejected the cooperation with extremist parties, including the KSČM and their successors<sup>17</sup>. Since this time a part of social democrats have been trying to change this resolution, however, up to now it is valid. In Eastern Germany the PDS and later the Left Party cooperated with social democrats only at regional level.

The right-wing extremists were parts of governmental coalitions in Poland (with the conservative party Law and Justice) and in Slovakia (in 1994-1998 with the right-wing centre oriented Movement for Democratic Slovakia – HZDS- with authoritarian tendencies and with left wing radical Association of Workers of Slovakia and since 2006 with the party Smer – Social Democracy and with the HZDS). In other countries the attempts to cooperate with democratic established parties were only limited and unsuccessful.

On the other hand, in all the countries some extremists have been trying to keep links to militant extremist milieu. The dogmatic communist parties had in the 90’s no significant militant satellite organizations and the anarchist/autonomous spectrum rejected their Leninist

dogmatism. A limited cooperation existed in the Czech Republic and Slovakia between some Trotskyists militants and satellite organizations of political parties. Recently in both these countries there exists a small young bolshevist milieu with militant tendencies, however, without support of the party leaders of the main communist parties.

Much stronger is the link between militant politics and right-wing extremist parties in East Central Europe, mostly in youth organizations of the right-wing political parties. This connection was typical a. o. of the Republican Youth (*Republiknská mládež*) in the Czech Republic, the All-polish Youth (*Młodzież Wszechpolska*)<sup>18</sup> as the satellite organization of the LPR or of the Youth of Slovak National Party (*Mládež Slovenskej národnej strany*)<sup>19</sup>.

A current phenomenon is the creation of paramilitary vigilant units for the purposes of party propaganda, a .o. the Hungarian Guard (*Magyar Garda- MG*) of the Jobbik party, the National Guard (*Národní garda – NG*) of the Czech National party or the Protection Corps of the Workers Party (*Ochranné sbory Dělnické strany*) in the Czech Republic<sup>20</sup>.

## 6. Legal and political measures against extremist parties

The representation of the new democratic societies tried to fight against extremist parties with the help of various means. The fall of communism in the East Central European countries was not connected with armed struggle or mass violence. A specific case is Slovenia, which fought in the short war in 1991 against Yugoslavian forces, however, this struggle is not possible to designate as a war democracy against non-democracy. The legal continuity with previous regimes was typical. In this environment there were no significant attempts to realize violent “revolution justice” against the state parties of the communist regimes.

In all the countries the fight against extremism during the transformation phase in the 90’s was connected with a relatively similar approach to left wing extremism and right-wing extremism. The norms of the European Union, the European Communities or the Council of Europe are mostly oriented against racism and xenophobia and in this sense against right-wing extremism. The conservative and liberal politicians from post-communist Europe enforced the adoption of anti-communist norms at European level because of historical experiences with communism, however, not successfully.

The law of political parties after the break up of communism in East Central European countries usually enforced the democratic character of political parties. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia the juridical approach has been strongly inspired by the German conception of militant democracy (“streitbare Demokratie”). All countries have legal instruments against

the extremist parties. However, the interpretation of legal norms is very difficult. The problem is to find the evidence that the official party program is not the same as the real goals of the party or that individual statements of politicians are typical of the whole party.

The real praxis is that only one small subject with clear anti-democratic goals was in 2006 banned – the Slovak Community (*Slovenská pospolitost' - SP*)<sup>21</sup>. In several cases the parties in the Czech Republic were not registered, a. o. the National Socialist Alliance and the National Party (which won by the court over the Czech ministry of interior). The attempts to ban the KSČM or the SPR.RSČ in the Czech Republic stayed only on political level and the real juridical process never started. The process against the NPD in Germany was due to the problems with evidence stopped.

More frequently are (in the Czech Republic and in Germany) bans of non-party organizations<sup>22</sup>. A topical case is the ban of the youth organization of the KSČM, the Communist Youth Association (*Komunistický svaz mládeže – KSM*), registered in legal form as a civic association.

The real effect on the activity of the extremist spectrum is limited. The members of the banned organizations have created new extremist structures and use the role of “martyrs” in their propaganda. On the other hand, democratic states declare the value orientation in their legal norm and their application. The application of law has a symbolic value.

A possible instrument against extremist parties is also criminal law. The prohibition of hate speech or the use of extremist symbols (in Hungary also explicitly the communist symbols) have limited the freedom of propaganda of the extremist parties. However, members of the extremist parties do not usually try to realize hate crimes in the public.

Not only legal norms were and are used against the extremist parties. The discursive politics of major political forces against extremism and media presentation of extremism caused a relatively weak position of extremism in East Central Europe during the transformation process (mostly in the sense of the public presentation of un-competency of extremist parties, not the primitive defamation of extremism).

On the other hand, the isolation of extremist parties in the party system was not always the rule (see previous chapter). The democratic parties sometimes profile themselves in the similar ways as the extremists, which was important for weakening of the extremist electorate (nationalist propaganda of the Hungarian or the Czech centre-right, social populism of some social democratic parties etc.).

A specific form of the restriction of extremism is the change of identity of the extremist parties. As mentioned above, after the fall of communism, several communist parties changed

their identity to social democratic/socialist parties (they are also members of transnational socialist party structures). In Hungary, in Slovenia or in Poland it was a short time process, in Slovakia a longer process. In the Czech Republic and in Germany the KSČM and PDS existed besides the traditional social democratic party.

It is questionable if there exists something similar to the process of “socialdemocratization” of left-wing extremist parties on the right-side of the political spectrum (“conservatisation” of right-wing extremist parties”?). Maybe that such a process characterizes the development of the Slovak National Party (after the model of the Italian National Alliance), however, it is only speculation.

## Conclusion

In East Central Europe the rise of political extremists is mostly connected with the socioeconomic transformation in the 90's (Hungary, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia) however, in several systems it has occupied the relevant position also later (right-wing extremism in Poland and Eastern Germany).

The strong presence of left wing extremism within the party system is currently typical of the Czech Republic and Eastern Germany, the presence of right wing extremism of Slovakia and Slovenia. In Slovakia and Poland the right-wing extremist parties were members of the governmental coalitions, however without impact on the democratic character of the political regime.

The extremist parties in East Central Europe have mixed since 1989 in various ways the strategic orientation to the established political parties and to the militant extremist environment. The democratic parts of the political system tried to counter the extremist influence by juridical and discourse methods. The real impact of legal measures is relatively limited. The development of political culture and political discourse during the post-communist transformation process had in several cases impact on the change of identity of the former extremist parties to non-extremist parties.

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