Coalition Formation and the Regime Divide in New Democracies

East Central Europe

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The ability to form stable governing coalitions is a basic precondition of effective democracy in multiparty parliamentary systems. Several explanations of the formation of such coalitions by political parties have contributed greatly to understanding how mature democracies function, but they have been less successful for the patterns of coalition formation in the new democracies of East Central Europe after the collapse of the Communist regimes in 1989.

Party coalitions in East Central Europe are as diverse as they are puzzling. Some parties have formed stable coalitions between ideologically close allies. For example, the Czech government from 1992 to 1996 was heralded as an example of mature coalition formation and stability and was easily explained by spatial theories of coalition formation. However, parties in other countries, such as Poland, rejected the very idea of such alliances, despite ideological proximity and complementary policy goals. Instead, they formed unstable and conflictual coalitions with second- or even third-best alternatives. Finally, in some cases parties from opposite ends of the political spectrum unexpectedly formed alliances, as in Slovakia.

Such patterns run counter to the predictions of theories of coalition formation. While no theory claims to predict all cases of coalition formation, they seem unusually weak for the postcommunist countries. There may be a more parsimonious explanation of coalition patterns in the region. The fundamental predictor of coalition formation continues to be the regime divide, the depth and character of the persisting conflict between the successors to the pre-1989 Communist parties and the parties emerging from the Communist-era opposition. The deeper this divide is, the lower the chances are that coalitions will form on the basis of similar policy goals or ideology between the Communist successors and their opposition counterparts. As for coalition formation efforts of the Communist successor parties, even where they have succeeded in moderating their ideology and in radically transforming their image, the regime divide can prevent them from forming coalitions with parties that share their policy preferences. While this cleavage shows signs of waning, the expectation of electoral punishment has prevented policy-convergent coalitions in the region for over a decade. Thus, the peculiarities of postauthoritarian transitions and the constraints they impose on coalition building add to theories of coalition formation.
Theories of Coalition Formation and Their Predictions

Coalitions have been defined as a collection of government parties. Most scholars agree that if the party composition changes, an election takes place, or the prime minister of the cabinet changes, the coalition ends. A stable coalition (the equilibrium) is reached when “a protocoalition $V$ will form a viable government if there is no alternative coalition $A$ which is supported by parties controlling more legislative votes than those supporting $V$, and which all parties supporting $A$ prefer to form rather than $V$.”

There are three main explanations of this process of coalition formation.

The dominant explanation argues that parties will try to form a minimum winning coalition, a collection of parties with the minimum number of seats to form a majority in the legislature. Since office-seeking is a zero-sum game (one partner’s gain is another’s loss), parties will minimize the extent to which they have to share offices. Majority governments will dominate, and office-seeking parties will bandwagon on to the proto-coalition in an effort to gain the spoils of office. Therefore, parties in East Central Europe should form coalitions irrespective of their historical roots or ideological preferences. Since the new parties in the region have been initially described as having vague ideologies, few clear policy differences, and office as their main goal, there are even more grounds to expect that the coalitions in the region will follow the minimum winning coalition model.

However, given the proliferation of minority governments (35 percent) and super-majority governments in western Europe, many scholars have relaxed the assumption of pure office-seeking. Parties have been found to seek policy, as well as office. The concept of a minimum connected winning coalition posits that parties form coalitions with ideologically proximate partners. In these spatial proximity models, policy goals, rather than office-seeking, underlie coalition formation, and the coalition parties will tend to converge in a zone of agreement on policy or ideology. If only one policy dimension is relevant, political parties do not jump over ideological neighbors in coalition formation. If there are several relevant policy dimensions, however, coalition bargaining may become unstable. Political institutions, such as ministerial policy autonomy, can reduce this instability.

If this explanation is correct, parties will form coalitions that minimize policy differences in comparison with other possible proto-coalitions. Both minority and majority governments fit this analytical framework, since the goals are no longer zero-sum. Therefore, in East Central Europe coalitions should coalesce around common policy goals, such as the large (if vague) initial support for economic and administrative restructuring, irrespective of party histories or the resulting size of the coalition.

Four assumptions of rationality underlie both of these approaches. Each party is treated as a unitary actor; coalition governments must command majority support in
the legislature; parties are motivated by either office or policy or both; and all winning combinations of parties represent possible coalition governments.\textsuperscript{11}

However, there are strong reasons to suggest that this last assumption should be relaxed. Elsewhere, parties perceived as a threat to the democratic system, or whose past alliances are unacceptable to the other parties’ electorates, have been kept out of coalitions. For example, many West European Communist parties have been excluded from government, despite policy positions that are often close to government parties. Neither pure office-seeking nor pure policy-seeking explanations can account for these patterns.\textsuperscript{12} Contrary to these models, therefore, some coalition governments are more probable than others. What constraints or criteria exclude parties from consideration as coalition partners?

The main constraint that determines coalition formation in the new democracies of East Central Europe is the regime divide between the parties originating from the Communist regime and those with roots in the former opposition to the Communist parties. This regime divide consists of the depth and character of the conflict between the Communist rulers and their opposition prior to the democratic transitions of 1989, whether it consisted of repression or negotiation, and, if negotiation, whether it was dominated by conflict or consensus. The more repressive or conflictual the relationship and the more recent the conflict were, the deeper the divide will be, and the less likely there will be democratic cooperation.\textsuperscript{13}

The regime divide is so strong because parties in a new democratic system seek first and foremost to establish clear and stable reputations. Reputations are the crucial signals by which both voters and other parties evaluate electoral appeals and policy proposals. Parties have been found to pursue credibility even when doing so adversely affects their short-term goals.\textsuperscript{14} Like others, party reputations are acquired through repeated, consistent, and sustained behavior, and consistency in parliamentary behavior lends credibility to party claims.\textsuperscript{15} In established, mature democracies—the analytical focus of minimal winning or spatial models—scholars can and do take parties’ established reputations for granted.

In the new democracies, however, establishment of party reputations was a goal itself, rather than a given. The new democratic system was too new to have generated party reputations. No political party could rely on its parliamentary record to establish its credibility immediately after 1989. Moreover, because of the profusion of inchoate political parties after democratic transitions, policy programs were both vague and numerous; ambiguous and overlapping stances often made meaningful distinctions impossible.\textsuperscript{16} Since the parties’ policy stances were often as vague as they were volatile, voters and other parties had difficulty readily identifying the party closest to them ideologically.

In the absence of an established parliamentary record or clear identities, the parties’ predemocratic past determined their coalition potential. Specifically, the greater the conflict between the Communist party and its opposition was prior to 1989, the
greater the divide between their successors became. At a time when ideological and policy stances were often either vague or contradictory, the most easily identifiable parliamentary cleavage was between parties of the opposition and parties stemming from the former regime. It was much easier to look at the parties’ pedigree, which was immutable and much more difficult to reinterpret for either the voters or the other political parties. The regime divide was thus the most convenient identification for the political parties and the easiest shortcut for voters. This cleavage between the two camps of the Communist era continued after the transition to democracy in 1989, because of the need to establish party identities and reputations. The nature and extent of the conflict between the two camps, in turn, established the likelihood of their cooperation. Where the conflict had been greater, parties were less likely to form coalitions across the regime divide, because other parties and voters would have charged them with betrayal of their identity and allies.

Thus, parties will form coalitions within their respective camps (groupings of parties originating in either the former regime or the former opposition), even if their ideological or policy stances are closer to parties from the opposite camp. However, where there was more negotiation and consensus between the two sides prior to the democratic transition, parties are more likely to cooperate in the new democratic system on the basis of ideological proximity and policy goals, rather than institutional origins.

Once parties decide they will form coalitions only within their respective camps, they have a limited number of potential partners. If they have a choice, they will pick as partners those parties closest to them on policy issues (thus furthering their reputation as consistent and pragmatic). If there are few parties within the same camp, they will simply form coalitions with all the parties within their camp, whether or not the coalitions guarantee a majority or proximity on policy and ideology.

There are two corollaries to this hypothesis. First, since the parties with roots in the anticommunist opposition have successfully replaced the Communist with a democratic system, there should be an asymmetry in coalition formation. The Communist successor parties should be more likely to reach out and be open to coalitions, while the opposition successor parties should be more likely to refuse to form coalitions with the successors to the Communist parties. Second, parties that cross the divide and form coalitions with parties from the opposite camp should be punished by either the electorate or by other parties at unusually high rates (irrespective of their performance or incumbency effects) during the next election and coalition formation cycle. Those who join the coalition (and thereby “betray” their camp and electorate) should be more affected than those who form the coalition.

Under what conditions will the regime divide no longer matter? As long as party elites perceive that they will be punished electorally, they have a disincentive to form coalitions with parties from the other camps. Once a party that forms a coalition across the divide is not punished by the electorate, other parties will be more likely
to form similar coalitions. As the severity of the punishment decreases, the likelihood of cross-camp coalitions increases. Either parties will care less about their reputation, or other sources of party reputation will trump the regime divide, or voters will no longer punish the “traitors.” For example, if there is a threat to the democratic system itself, all other parties may close ranks and form a cross-camp coalition against the antidemocratic party. Alternatively, policy pressures (such as demands of international organizations, economic crises, and security conflicts) could also prompt cross-camp coalitions. Finally, time itself is likely to have two effects. Generational change will bring a new cohort of voters and politicians who had no stake in the former conflict, and with time the parties will develop reputations based on parliamentary and electoral records, as in the established democracies in the West.

To summarize, in new democracies the politicians’ first concern is to establish clear reputations, widely accepted expectations about a party’s behavior and intent. In a posttransition system marked by vague and overlapping policy stances, the regime divide is the most fundamental cleavage and therefore the clearest source of party identity. Therefore, coalitions will form within the constraints of the regime divide. If parties cross this divide, they will be punished by the electorate. The regime divide will persist as long as parties care about their reputations or voters punish defection.

Methodology and Summary of Findings

To test these hypotheses, I compiled a record of all government coalitions after 1989 in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. Scholars have examined elite sympathies regarding other parties as a means for testing hypotheses of coalition formation. However, this approach may be misleading. If, for example, a party receives either 2 percent or 70 percent of the vote, elite dislike of it would be irrelevant in coalition formation. In these four countries, the first party would not have entered parliament, while the latter would have had no need for coalition partners.

To test the minimum winning coalition model, I examined whether the actual coalition or other party combinations better approximated a minimum winning coalition. In all cases, this coalition consisted of a simple majority. If no other combination of parties could have better approximated the minimum winning coalition standard of 50 plus 1 percent, the actual coalition was coded as complying with the expectations of the minimum winning coalition model.

Tested against the actual record of coalition formation, the minimum winning coalition model predicted 24 percent of the coalitions correctly. This result is even less than the 34 percent the model predicted in western Europe. The rest of the
coalitions were either under- or oversized, despite the availability of other coalition parties. Both the ODS and the CSSD led minority governments in the Czech Republic, and no majority government existed in Poland until 1993, while two out of the three Hungarian governments were too big by the simple majority standard but too small for the super two-thirds majority required to pass major pieces of legislation.20

In testing the spatial proximity model, the two examined dimensions of party competition were the parties’ economic policies and their declarations of worldviews.21 The first dimension consists of the parties’ stances on economic reform. Scholars have shown that the economic divide is the fundamental one around which the Left-Right spectrum is structured.22 In East Central Europe public opinion polls also show that the economic situation is voters’ foremost concern.23 The second dimension in East Central Europe runs along a spectrum from secular/cosmopolitan/liberal to religious/nationalist/authoritarian stances.24 This world-view dimension dominated the political discourse in Poland from 1991 to 1992 over questions of abortion and religion in schools, in Slovakia and in Hungary intermittently over questions of minorities and nationalism, and in the Czech Republic during the recent debates over Roma minority policies. The regime divide cuts across both the worldview and economic dimensions; debates over these issues raged between and within both camps.

To test the spatial proximity model, I first used the parties’ programmatic declarations and electoral appeals to place them relative to each other on both the economic redistribution/free market the cosmopolitan/authoritarian dimensions. The more a party advocated a free market, privatization, economic reform, and free trade, the farther it was placed along the free market end of the economic dimension. Conversely, the more a party advocated redistribution, state ownership, a slowing down of economic reform, and state protection of vulnerable sectors, the farther it was placed along the redistributive end. The more a party advocated freedom of speech, secular rule, minority protection, and cultural openness, the farther it was placed along the cosmopolitan end of the world-view dimension. The more a party advocated censorship of offensive speech, an active role for the church in state affairs, nationalist sentiment, xenophobia, and protection of national culture from foreign influence, the farther it was placed along the authoritarian end. The results formed a two axis spatial graph of parties’ ideological locations.

To determine whether the coalition patterns were consistent with the expectations of the spatial model, I used a two step measure. First, I measured the average Euclidean distance between the coalition partners. If no other coalition could have minimized the distance, then the existing coalition was coded as compliant with the predictions of the spatial proximity model. However, since the saliency of a given cleavage may differ from party system to party system, a fairer test of spatial prox-
Imunity should examine the coalitions that would have formed if only one dimension dominated the process of coalition formation. Would the coalitions be ideologically connected on either dimension of party competition? I therefore also measured the relative ideological distances on each of the two individual dimensions for coalitions that did not minimize the Euclidean distances.

Only 43 percent of the coalitions minimized the average Euclidean distance between the stances on both dimensions. This result is considerably less than the 85 percent of West European coalitions explained by a broadly policy-based theory. In addition, 10 percent of the coalitions were connected on the world-view dimension alone, and 24 percent of coalitions were connected only on the economic dimension.

Some of the odder bedfellows were the coalitions of the economically reformist SdRP with the ultrapopulist PSL in Poland in 1993–97, the liberal UW with the populist AWS in Poland after 1997, the social democratic SDL’ with the Christian Democratic KDH in Slovakia in 1994 and again in 1998, and the economically liberal Fidesz with the more populist MDF and FKGP in Hungary in 1998. Among the coalitions that should have formed but did not were the leftist coalition of the Czech Social Democrats with the postcommunists in 1997, the populist HZDS with the leftist SDL’ in Slovakia in 1992 and again in 1994–98, and the secular, proreform UW-SdRP coalition in Poland after 1993 and again in 1997.

Finally, to examine the effects of the regime divide I traced the histories of the parties. If all the coalition parties came from either the former opposition to Communist rule or from the former Communist rulers, the coalition was coded as complying with the expectations of the regime divide model; 86 percent of the coalitions were made up of parties with common roots in either the Communist or opposition camps. In addition, the regime divide model further predicts that parties within the regime divide will form coalitions based on policy proximity; 66 percent, or twelve out of the eighteen coalitions formed from one camp, conform to this expectation on at least one dimension of policy, and 39 percent (seven out of eighteen) do so on both main dimensions of policy proximity. The results are summarized Table 1. More coalitions conformed to the expectations of the regime divide model than to either the minimum winning coalition or the spatial proximity models.

Several coalitions conformed to predictions of multiple models. One coalition was predicted by both the minimum winning coalition and the spatial models; four

Table 1  Determinants of Coalition Formation in East Central Europe after 1989

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coalition model:</th>
<th>Minimum Winning</th>
<th>Spatial Proximity</th>
<th>Regime Divide</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Coalitions</td>
<td>5 24%</td>
<td>Economic issues alone 5 24%</td>
<td>Both (Euclidean) 9 43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predicted Correctly</td>
<td>2 10%</td>
<td>Worldview issues alone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
coalitions were predicted by all three models; and six were predicted by both the regime divide and the spatial models.\(^\text{27}\)

To examine the corollary of asymmetry (that Communist successors find other parties more attractive as coalition partners than the other parties find them), I compared scores given by respondents in public opinion polls from 1994 to 1996 about how representative the Communist successor parties were seen by supporters of the other parties and compared the results to how supporters of Communist successor parties saw the other parties.\(^\text{28}\) The results show a general asymmetry in the desirability of each camp to the other’s supporters, thus partly explaining why Communist successors seek coalitions while the other parties do not (see Table 2). Thus, the Communist successor parties have to prove themselves to both the electorate and to other parties, but they have less to fear from forming coalitions since their electorate views other parties as roughly equally representative. This asymmetry also suggests why the coalition partners of the Communist successors are more likely to be punished by the electorate in the next round of elections. Their constituency views the Communist successors as far less representative. Parties that cross the regime divide to join coalitions lose a far greater proportion of their electorate than other incumbents or the parties that formed the divide-crossing coalitions (see Table 3).

Parties that cross the regime divide lose support in the next elections at rates anywhere from twice to five times as high as other incumbent parties. This outcome

Table 2  Indicators of Asymmetry in Coalition-Seeking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale: 1-7, with 7 as most representative.</th>
<th>Poland</th>
<th>Czech</th>
<th>Slovak</th>
<th>Hungarian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Representativeness ranking of communist successor party by other voters</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>3.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Representativeness” ranking of other parties by communist successor supporters</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>3.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ranking of party by party supporters</td>
<td>6.11</td>
<td>6.43</td>
<td>6.43</td>
<td>6.18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 3  Indicators of Electoral Punishment of Parties That Crossed the Regime Divide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Average electoral support lost by incumbents in the next election, as % of their previous support.</th>
<th>Electoral support lost by parties that crossed the regime divide, as % of their previous support.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>-29.8%</td>
<td>-53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>-18.9%</td>
<td>-60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>No crossing of regime divide</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>-6%</td>
<td>-29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
accords with the finding that, even though coalitions assume collective responsibility for policy, both voters and other politicians differentiate between coalition partners and shift support depending on their perceptions of a party’s culpability. This electoral punishment also applies when parties with roots in the same regime camp form coalitions, if one of the partners has otherwise successfully disassociated itself from that camp.

Other potential reasons for electoral losses, such as poor government performance and failure to deliver on promised policies or patronage, had less influence on the size of the punishment. If poor government performance was the root cause, all incumbents should have been punished, not just the junior partners. If failure to deliver on policy or patronage promises was the cause, then other junior coalition partners, equally constrained by the limitations of a junior role, should have been punished at the same rates. Voters specifically punished the “defectors,” not the other coalition parties.

**Coalition Formation and the Communist Successor Parties**

The Communist successor parties’ efforts to form coalitions best illustrate the importance of the regime divide in the new democracies of East Central Europe. First, they are the key representatives of the regime divide. Their past as the Communist rulers made them paradoxically both the most experienced and the most discredited political actors after 1989. After the mass anticommunist movements fragmented in 1990–91 into several smaller competitors, their successors were still united in their opposition to the Communist past and the Communist successors. Thus, the successor parties were ostracized and isolated in the parliaments as the unwelcome reminders (and remainders) of the Communist regime.

Second, the Communist successor parties were uniformly interested in pursuing coalitions and cooperating with other parties. However, they varied in achieving this objective. Three out of the four parties examined formed government coalitions, and two of them crossed the regime divide. Of the two that formed coalitions across the divide, one was severely punished by its electorate, while the junior coalition partner of the other was similarly punished. Therefore, these parties provide the variation in the outcomes that makes it possible to examine the regime divide and its effects on coalition formation in democratic East Central Europe.

In Poland the regime divide dominated coalition formation. The regime divide itself was characterized by recent and inimical confrontation: the rise of the independent trade union Solidarity in 1980, its transformation into a mass nationwide opposition movement, and the Communist regime’s crackdown and imposition of martial law in December 1981. Not only was the relationship between the postcommunist and postopposition forces highly adversarial, but many of the main players were still
active on the political scene. Therefore, even though the Communist party transformed itself radically into a moderate, social democratic, proreform party, it has been unable to form a single coalition with parties arising from the former opposition to Communist rule.

Thus, after the first free elections, held in 1991, the Polish Communist successor (Social Democracy of Poland, SdRP) came in second with 12 percent of the vote but was shut out of the coalition formation process. It continued to be excluded a priori from consideration as a coalition partner or parliamentary ally, despite programmatic similarities and evident professionalism. Its policy proposals were also ignored, even as it supported the radical economic and political reforms of 1989–91 in an attempt to appear “responsible” and gain greater acceptance. The SdRP rather bitterly concluded that “sometimes we’d get the feeling that, even if we proposed something that was most obvious and beneficial, it would still be rejected on the basis of its origins.”

Nor did the top vote-getter, the Democratic Union (UD), a centrist post-Solidarity party well-respected for its moderation and expertise, easily form a coalition. In the highly fragmented Polish parliament other post-Solidarity parties initially refused to form a coalition with the UD because its leader, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, had called for reconciliation and for a “thick line” to be drawn between the two regimes, rather than for the prosecution of Communists and their successors. Jan Olszewski instead initially formed a minority coalition dominated by Christian Democrat groups, only to fall from power in July 1992. This coalition minimized the differences in world-views but was too small to govern effectively.

His successor, Hanna Suchocka, formed a coalition that included both the Christian Democrats and centrist UD and the liberal Liberal-Democratic Congress (KLD) and Polish Economic Program (PPG). The differences between the Christian Democrats and the coalition partners comprised both world-view and economic issues. The Christian Democrats proved an especially disruptive force in the parliament, routinely torpedoing proposals they saw as antifamily or antichurch or as too brazenly liberal in economic policy. Nevertheless, the UD again excluded the Communist successor from consideration as a coalition partner.

The Suchocka government fell in June 1993. In the September 1993 elections the Communist successor SdRP was the largest party with 20 percent of the vote. Divisions over joining its government again fell along the cleavage first expressed in 1980–81: all of Solidarity’s successor parties rejected a coalition with the SdRP, despite ideological similarities in the Labor Union (UP) and the UD. Immediately after the elections, SdRP leader Aleksander Kwasniewski repeatedly insisted that the UD would be the best partner for the SdRP, as it would reassure the West of the new government’s reformist continuity. The SdRP had already formed some local coalitions with the UD. It had also attempted several times to reach out nationally. Moreover, there were numerous personal ties between the leaders of the SdRP and
the UD. However, personal and ideological similarities had little effect on the parties’ coalition formation. Despite personal friendships, shared experiences during the round table negotiations of 1989, and similar views, especially on the role of the church in Polish society, access to abortion, religion in schools, and foreign relations, the UP and UW (the new party formed by the UP and KLD after the 1993 elections) could not afford an open alliance with the SdRP.

Although former Communist reformers belonged to the UP, it said that a coalition with the SdRP was “the limit...one that we will not cross.” The UW, in turn, promptly responded that it would not join any coalitions with the Communist successors. Because of its shared claims of expertise and managerial competence with the SdRP, one of the few things that distinguished it from the postcommunists was its origin in Solidarity. An open, formal alliance with the SdRP, UW leaders feared, would eliminate the UW from the political scene. Such a coalition would be possible only if “a massive disaster” occurred and the rest of the political scene became extremely radicalized.

Faced with rejection by its first choice of partners, the SdRP was forced to form a government coalition with the Peasants’ Party (PSL). It shared very few policy stances with the PSL but had a common pedigree: the PSL was a satellite party under Communism, nominally representing the large rural sector, but subservient to the Communist party. Formally, the PSL also came from the Communist successor camp. However, it acted as if it came from the opposition, using the argument that, as a satellite party, it was also oppressed by the Communists. After 1989, given its single-minded drive to benefit farmers, it developed a strong identity as a Christian peasant party and attracted conservative rural voters, many of whom were strongly opposed to the Communist successor party.

From the start, the two parties had very different economic and political aims. Differences immediately emerged and persisted over the concordat with the church, agricultural policy, market reform, local administrative reforms, and privatization. As an outgoing finance minister put it, the PSL acted as a brake on reforms, “thinking only about how much it can grab for the peasants.” The PSL also treated the coalition as an endless source of patronage. At the same time it criticized the SdRP, knowing full well that the SdRP had no other potential coalition partners, and refused to accept collective responsibility for government actions.

The SdRP retained its electoral support in the 1997 elections, gaining votes in absolute numbers and increasing its share of the vote from 20 percent to 27 percent. The PSL, however, lost half of its support, declining from 15 percent to 7 percent. Even though the PSL belonged to the same regime camp for coalition purposes and other parties insisted that the PSL and SdRP form the coalition because of their common roots, its conservative rural supporters thought the coalition crossed the regime divide and punished it accordingly.

When the post-Solidarity parties returned to power within the AWS electoral...
coalition in 1997, the familiar pattern reemerged. The UW joined the populist (and fractious) AWS in the government coalition, even though much of the AWS opposed UW’s continued support of economic and administrative reform.

Thus, the patterns of Polish coalition formation follow the expectations of the reputation model. Despite both ideological proximity and numerical need, parties from the Solidarity camp refused to form alliances with parties from the postcommunist camp. Within the post-Solidarity camp policy proximity determined coalition potential in the first Christian Democratic coalition. Once this coalition was expanded to include the liberal UD, KLD, and PPG parties, it reverted to a simple regime divide coalition. The two corollaries were also confirmed. The SdRP consistently sought cooperation, and no other party sought a coalition with it. And the PSL was punished for its coalition, while the SdRP was not.

In contrast, Hungarian political parties accepted the Communist successor more readily, because the regime divide was less deep. The major state-society conflict of the Communist era occurred in the Hungarian uprising and its brutal suppression in 1956. Afterwards, the Communist party and its social opposition reached a consensus around social stability and the prevention of another such tragedy. The Communists slowly liberalized both the political and the economic spheres and even allowed partly free elections. Moreover, this conflict had occurred over thirty years before the transition to democracy; the vast majority of the players had left the political scene. Consequently, the relationship between the party and society was far less adversarial. The Hungarian Communist party’s past was nowhere near the liability of the Polish party’s, and its transformation into a social democratic party after 1989 was far more credible to both the electorate and to the other parties.

Initially, in 1990–92, the Hungarian Communist successor, the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSzP), was isolated by the new government led by the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF).\textsuperscript{44} From 1990 to 1994, despite the proximity of its ideology and support base to the existing coalition, it was not asked to join the coalition.\textsuperscript{45} Moreover, despite numerous personal ties with the other parties’ leaders—some in had fact helped to found the anticommunist opposition groupings of the late 1980s together—the Communist successor was shunned by the MDF government in parliament.\textsuperscript{46} However, other opposition parties welcomed its “exit from its political ghetto,” even if they did not immediately seek cooperation with the MSzP.\textsuperscript{47} The MSzP avoided direct confrontation with the government and focused instead on “acting responsibly in the parliament and displaying internal unity.”\textsuperscript{48} As the conflicts increased within the coalition and in the parliament, the MSzP and its moderation began to look increasingly attractive, especially given its support for the economic and political reforms.\textsuperscript{49} With the MSzP’s electoral victory in 1994, the Communist successor party no longer needed to ask unilaterally for coalition support. The MSzP won 33 percent of the vote and 54 percent of the seats; it formed a governing coalition with the Alliance of Free Democrats (SzDSz), a liberal party that had arisen
from the pre-1989 opposition to the Communist regime. Ideologically, the SzDSz was not the only party close to the MSzP. Fidesz was just as close. However, SzDSz elites felt that, after also being excluded from power in 1990, they now had their chance to govern, with a competent, ideologically moderate partner.

Despite the shallower regime divide, however, the SzDSz’s electorate “punished” it for the coalition. Its support dropped from 19.7 percent in 1994 to 7.8 percent in the 1998 elections. Moreover, the new coalition formed after the 1998 elections, led by the centrist Alliance of Young Democrats (Fidesz), excluded the SzDSz along with an extremist nationalist party, the Hungarian Justice and Life Party (MIEP), but included all of the other noncommunist parties. Fidesz explicitly punished the SzDSz for its cooperation with the MSzP and reasserted the primacy of the regime divide. Nor did it brook discussion with the MSzP, despite continued ideological similarities.

Thus, the Hungarian coalition patterns support the reputation-seeking model. Hungarian political parties could more easily overcome the shallower regime divide and form coalitions across that divide. However, voters still punished the “collaborator” with the postcommunist party, far more than the Communist successor itself, which largely retained its share of the vote in the 1998 elections. The subsequent coalition was formed along the regime divide and excluded the “collaborator.”

Czech parliamentary coalitions formed exclusively within the former opposition’s camp, even when they had to govern as minority governments after 1997. No party wanted to cross the regime divide to form a coalition with the Communist successor, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSCM). The regime divide was too deep because of the Communist party’s refusal to liberalize or to engage the opposition after the Prague Spring of 1968. Instead of negotiation, however adversarial, the Communist party consistently repressed and persecuted the opposition. After 1989 the cleavage was exacerbated by the Communist successor’s inability to transform itself into a more moderate party and by its isolation by the president, Vaclav Havel, who repeatedly denounced it.

Consequently, the other parties excluded the KSCM a priori from governing and electoral coalitions and put it on a par with the neo-fascist Republicans, despite its repeated efforts to establish good relations. The KSCM’s legislative proposals were kept off the agenda in several cases, prompting the party to declare that it would pursue only policy proposals in “areas of interest.” Instead of negotiating with the KSCM, the other parties attempted to delegitimize it. The KSCM complained continually of social and parliamentary ostracism, and its elites admitted that it had little chance of widespread acceptance.

Potential partners rebuffed the KSCM repeatedly. Most important, the party the KSCM initially identified as an attractive coalition partner, the Social Democrats (CSSD), rejected it outright. Even when the CSSD was extremely weak (it barely cleared the 5 percent electoral threshold in 1990–92), it refused to form a coalition
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with the KSCM, the only other Left party in the Czech Republic. Social Democratic leaders declared that no coalitions were possible with the Communist successor KSCM due to “irreconcilable value differences” between the two parties and because the KSCM “lost its place among the system of democratic parties” in the Czech Republic.57

Instead, the parliament was dominated from 1990 to 1997 by the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), one of the offshoots of the Civic Forum, the mass movement that brought down Communism in 1989. The ODS steadfastly refused to negotiate with the Czech Communist successors and instead formed a coalition with the two parties whose policy goals were closest to its own: the ODA and the KDU-CSL. The same coalition formed again after the June 1996 elections. However, it fell apart in December 1997 after revelations of ODS corruption.

After a caretaker government, the 1998 elections brought the Social Democrats into power. The ODS refused to form a grand coalition unless it dominated the cabinet, and the other parties refused to join a coalition with the leftist Social Democrats. Since the KSCM was the one remaining potential partner, its leaders hoped for an informal coalition with the Social Democrats. However, the Social Democrats once again refused this option and instead chose to form a minority government, rather than risk being tarred with the brush of Communist collaboration.

Thus, the Czech patterns of coalition formation confirm the regime divide model. Parties formed coalitions exclusively within the former opposition camp, because of the extremely deep regime divide. Rather than risk electoral punishment, parties formed minority governments. Finally, while the Communist successor desperately sought allies, it was thwarted by all the other parties. The regime divide was so deep as to make impossible the one coalition predicted by both minimum winning and spatial proximity models, between the Social Democrats and the Communist successor in 1998.

Slovakia’s coalition patterns are perhaps the most unorthodox, in keeping with the nature of its nascent democracy. They also illustrate the conditions under which the regime divide can be overcome. Three factors contributed to a shallower regime divide in Slovakia than in the Czech Republic. First, the repression of the opposition after 1968 was milder in Slovakia. Second, Slovakia experienced real gains, in the form of both economic subsidies and some measure of regional autonomy, after 1968. Third, it was the unspoken understanding (and after 1989 a main claim of the Communist successors) that the system in Slovakia could have been different, had it not been for Czech domination. Therefore, although the conflict between regime and society was as recent as in the Czech Republic, it was not as deep or as bitter. For its part, the Communist successor, the Party of the Democratic Left (SDL'), largely transformed itself, made possible by the same federative policies after 1968 and the pool of reformist elites they allowed to flourish.58

Slovakia had a relatively small pool of intellectuals and politicians, and
Communists dispersed into almost all the main parties after 1989. By 1992 they either firmly committed themselves to democratic rule (KDH, SDL', DU) or made populist and nationalist appeals with minimal commitments to democracy and the rule of law (HZDS, SNS, and later ZRS). Therefore, in addition to the regime divide, a cross-cutting cleavage ran between democratic and populist parties.

Vladimir Meciar, himself a former Communist, and his Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) ruled Slovakia beginning with the 1992 elections. A populist party with little patience for democratic practice and policymaking, the HZDS formed a coalition with the nationalist SNS in 1992 and again after the September 1994 elections. In response to Meciar’s heavy-handed tactics, the democratic parties banded together against the HZDS, which they perceived as a threat to the democratic system. As one of the few stable and consistent defenders of democracy in Slovakia, the Communist successor SDL' more easily overcame the regime divide and, more important, would have had to participate in any coalition that replaced Meciar. In March 1994, after months of negotiation with the HZDS to moderate its policies, the SDL' joined other democratic parties to bring down the HZDS government.

Thus, the Slovak Communist successor not only crossed the regime divide, but also formed a coalition with its ideological opposite, the Christian Democrats, to protect democratic and market reforms. Joining them in the coalition were three centrist splinter parties. The policy distance between the Christian Democrats and the SDL' was considerable, especially on the world-view dimension. The SDL' could cross the regime divide because the divide was shallower then in other countries and because a real threat to democracy made such a coalition imperative. The parties cared more about this threat than about their immediate reputation with the voters.

Nonetheless, as the junior partner in a coalition that straddled the regime divide the SDL' was punished for its defection. In the elections held later that year, in September 1994, the SDL' won barely 10 percent of the votes, instead of the 25 percent it had expected. However, the SDL' persevered in its opposition to the HZDS. Given their common roots and shared constituencies, several leaders in both the HZDS and the SDL' felt their alliance would be natural. However, if the SDL' joined a coalition with the HZDS, it not only would have risked subordinating itself to a highly autocratic party, but would also have lost its hard-earned reputation as a protector of democracy. At the same time, it was reluctant to cross the regime divide again. Therefore, the SDL' refused to join either the HZDS coalition or the anti-HZDS electoral coalition, the Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK), in 1997. Instead, it ran by itself in the 1998 elections. It joined the new government coalition with the SDK in the name of preserving democracy but exacted nine out of twenty government ministries.

In Slovakia a shallower regime divide allowed the Communist and opposition successors to form coalitions. The other post-1989 political divide in Slovakia was
between democratic politics and populism, the latter characterized by nationalism, patronage, and the oppression of political opponents. Consequently, there was less asymmetry in coalition formation between the Communist and opposition successors, even though voters punished the SDL’ electorally for crossing the divide. Thus, regime divide is not the only cleavage that drives coalition formation. An even more fundamental disagreement over commitment to the new system and its institutionalization can trump regime divide and parties’ focus on it as a chief determinant of their reputation. The threat to the democratic system in the form of the HZDS forced the parties to pay less attention to their reputations and more to preserving the democratic political system.

Generally, however, the regime divide has continued to structure coalition formation, as parties have sought to develop clear and stable reputations in the new democracies. Parties constrained themselves either by eliminating some possibilities altogether or by making certain coalitions and parliamentary actions far less likely. The relationship between state and society in the Communist regime determined the relative ease and flexibility with which Communist successor parties formed coalitions.

Given this divide, ideological proximity can even be an obstacle to coalition formation when the reputation of the party that forms or dominates the coalition would adversely affect the support of the would-be coalition partners. In Poland and the Czech Republic parties ostensibly close to the Communist successors refused to form coalitions with them. Similarly, the Slovak SDL’ formed a coalition with one of the parties farthest away from it ideologically. The effects of the regime divide can outweigh ideological similarities.

Conclusion

The formation of some coalitions much more readily than others in East Central Europe defies the predictions of both ideological and policy-centered theories. The regime divide poses a problem for theories of coalition formation, since “elegant mathematical formulations of bargaining power do not respond well to the ad hoc deletion of parties from the universe” of potential partners.

Coalitions in new democracies form along the regime divide, since the new parties’ first priority after the democratic transition is to develop a consistent identity and reputation that will allow them to gain a steady electorate. The deeper this regime divide is, the less likely will coalitions form to bridge it. As a corollary, old regime parties are more likely to seek than to be sought in coalition formation; the process of reputation building is inherently asymmetrical. Parties that cross the divide will likely be punished by voters in the next round of elections. The divide will persist until voters reduce their punishment of the “defectors” or parties begin to care less about their historical identity.
This analysis has focused on coalition formation, rather than on coalition stability. Policy and ideological diversity within the coalition both have been found to determine coalition stability, yet it is not clear whether these factors play the same role in new democracies. While policy and ideology can bring coalitions together or keep parties apart in established democracies, the parties’ political pedigree can be the most important determinant of coalition formation in new democracies.

NOTES

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13. This definition of the regime divide differs from Herbert Kitchelt, Zdenka Mansfeldova, Radoslaw Markowski, and Gabor Toka, Post-Communist Party Systems (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Rather than the type of Communist regime, this approach looks at the history of the interactions between the party and the opposition. In Kitchelt's specification, there should be identical results for Poland and Hungary because of similarities in the regime type.
17. All the data on coalitions, party spatial locations, and codings are available from the author.
20. To give the greatest chance to the minimum winning coalition hypothesis, I coded simple majority Hungarian coalitions as compliant with its predictions.
25. Budge and Keman, p. 44.
27. The one coalition predicted by both minimum winning coalition and spatial models was the MSzP–SzDSz coalition in Hungary, 5.94–5.98. The four coalitions predicted by all three models were the two ODS–KDU-CSL–ODA coalitions in the Czech Republic, 6.92–6.96 and 6.96–11.97; the VPN–KDH coalition in Slovakia, 6.90–3.91; and the HZDS–SNS coalition in Slovakia, 6.92–3.94 (spatial proximity on the economic dimension only). The six coalitions predicted by both the regime divide and the spatial coalition models were the KLD–PC–UD–OKP coalition in Poland, 1.91–12.91; the PC–PL–SLCh–ZChN–PChD coalition in Poland, 12.91–7.92 (spatial proximity on the world-view dimension only); the OF–KDU–HSD–SMS coalition in the Czech Republic, 6.90–6.92; the HZDS–ZRS–SNS
coalition in Slovakia, 10.94–10.98; and the MDF–FKgP–KDPN coalition and the Fidesz–FKgP–MDF coalition in Hungary, 5.90–5.94 and 5.98– (spatial proximity on the world-view dimension only). An additional four coalitions were predicted by the spatial proximity and the regime divide models, but there were noncoalition parties that were just as close to the party that formed the coalition as to the parties that joined it.

28. Replicating the analysis in Kitschelt, Mansfeldova, Markowski, and Toka.


33. Five governments were formed and fell in the parliament’s first four years, and parliamentary parties were highly unstable.


35. Tygodnik Solidarnosc, Aug. 5, 1994. The Freedom Union’s leader, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, initially forbade such coalitions with the SLD but revoked this prohibition after coalitions were formed in several cities.

36. For example, it offered to stabilize the government of Hanna Suchocka, but she refused to negotiate with it. Rzeczpospolita, Sept. 3, 1993.


42. For example, in twenty-two out of thirty cases the PSL nominated its own party activists to various posts. The SLD did so in only one out of eight cases. Trybuna, Feb. 7, 1994.


48. Ibid., p. 25.


50. The MSzP took nine out of the twelve ministries, leaving internal affairs, culture and education, and transport to the SzDSz.

51. Markowski argues that Fidesz was actually closer to the MSzP. Kitschelt, Mansfeldova, Markowski, and Toka place the SzDSz next to the MSzP on several dimensions.

52. For example, even as he met with the representatives of all the other parliamentary parties, including the right-wing extremist SPR-RSC, Havel refused to meet with the representatives of the KSCM.


55. Dokumenty II Sjezdu KSCM, p. 10.
56. Including the HSD-SMS, a regional party, Jiri Dienstbier's Civic Movement, and the Czech Socialist Party.


58. Because of the strict centralization of power in the Czechoslovak Communist party, orders flowed from Prague to the Slovak regional party heads, and Bratislava was largely neglected by party supervision and control commissions. Pockets of reformists survived.


60. Narodna Obroda, Feb. 21, 1996.

61. The Alternative of Political Realism and the Alliance of Democrats (which later joined to form the Democratic Union) and the National Democratic Party.

62. Markowski.

63. One major shared constituency of the two parties comprised the “red managers,” former party directors who managed newly privatized enterprises. TASR, Daily News Monitor, 3 (October 1994).


65. Markowski, p. 233.
