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Boosting Party Engagement in Central and Eastern Europe

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Summary

In Central and Eastern Europe, political parties are among the least trusted institutions, and politicians among the least trusted professional groups. In fact, anti-party sentiment is so strong that hardly any political entity in the region uses the word "party" in its name.

This does not augur well for the political future of the region. The legitimacy and effectiveness of democratic systems depend to a significant extent on the quality of political parties: the kind of members and leaders they have, the degree to which they have a link to the electorate, or the level of expertise they can bring to designing and implementing reasonable policies. In an environment dominated by mistrust toward parties, as seen in the region, it is hard to expect a "positive selection," whereby the most talented and public-spirited citizens get engaged in parties.

This paper outlines the status quo of party engagement in Central and Eastern Europe thirty years after the fall of the communist regimes, and suggests options for how to improve it.

First, the status quo of engagement in political parties is presented across the region, and specifically in three representative cases: Poland, Serbia, and Ukraine. In Poland, party membership is very low, at around 1 percent of the electorate. This can be explained to some extent by bad memories of party politics under communism, but it is also a product of conscious choices of political leaders who consider a "cadre party" model as superior to a "mass party" model. In Serbia, a very high number of people are members of parties, but often for clientelistic reasons. Ukraine stands out due to its system of "virtual" party politics in which genuine parties with active members find it hard to compete against "political projects" supported by wealthy individuals.

Second, it is argued that boosting party engagement in the region requires a tailored approach that takes into account specific barriers preventing engagement in three clusters of countries.

In "cadre democracies" (the Visegrad and Baltic states), engagement could be boosted by incremental changes of the regulatory environment for parties, by civic education (especially among youth), and by stronger experimentation by parties with new forms of membership. A major challenge lies in preventing damages to a level playing field for parties.

In "patronage democracies" (Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia, and the Western Balkan states), party engagement could be boosted by reorienting political competition toward a contest of different visions of public policies rather than competitive clientelism. An important measure for boosting engagement in this cluster is to create fair framework conditions for all parties. This includes fair access to the media, fair elections, and ending political violence.

Creating a level playing field for all parties is also a challenge for "captured democracies" of Ukraine and Moldova. When powerful private interests dominate politics, public-spirited engagement in parties becomes a frustrating, and ultimately futile, experience. Besides levelling the field for parties, it seems necessary to improve the regulatory environment for parties in these countries, and to invest in civic education.

The Long Shadow of Vaclav Havel

In Czechoslovakia's 1990 elections, the first free ones after the fall of the Iron Curtain, Vaclav Havel's Civic Forum ran on the slogan "Parties are for party members, Civic Forum is for everyone."[1] This captured public sentiment in Central and Eastern Europe at that time. The word "party" invoked bad associations with the recently overthrown communist regimes.

Political parties matter, however. Modern democracies offer multiple forms of political engagement outside of them, such as electoral participation, consumer participation, protest activity or contacting elected officials.[2] Furthermore, engagement can be online instead of offline, and ad hoc instead of permanent. Nevertheless, the legitimacy of democracies depends largely on the performance of political parties. This is because they play two key roles. First, they aggregate interests of groups and individuals into policy programs, thereby ensuring that citizens' will is represented and competing interests are reconciled as far as possible. Second, parties implement public policies (when in government) or scrutinize the government (when in opposition), thereby making sure that democracy involves not just discussions, but also tangible results of the best possible quality. To perform these two functions, parties need an organizational form that is adequate for the political environment in a specific country, as well as at least a nucleus of engaged citizens.

This paper focuses on party engagement in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) thirty years after the fall of the communist regimes. It examines the state of citizen engagement in parties and outlines some options on how to improve it. It shows that successful parties in the region organize their work in different ways, from mass-membership to cadre-party models.[3] The paper does not assume that there is an ideal form of party organization, but it assumes that citizens' engagement in political parties is valuable and should be promoted.

The paper is structured in three main sections. The first offers an overview of the level and dynamics of party engagement in the region, and why engagement is the way it is. The second section focuses on Poland, Serbia, and Ukraine, analyzing key barriers to party engagement there. The third section argues that boosting party engagement in the CEE countries requires a tailored approach. A three-fold typology is proposed, whereby countries from the region are clustered on the basis of barriers to party engagement. The papers concludes with suggestions on how to boost engagement through regulatory changes, the adaptation of parties, and the support of international donors, the European Union and European party families.

Party Engagement

Status Quo and Dynamics

The most clear-cut indicator of party engagement is the level of membership in parties. Parties in the CEE region stand out by having comparatively low membership levels: the average level of party membership in CEE countries is 3 percent of the electorate, roughly half the average for Western and Southern European democracies (5.6 percent combined).[4] (See Figure 1.)

Nevertheless, there are marked differences among CEE countries. Party membership in the Visegrad countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) is among the lowest (about 1 percent of the electorate), while membership levels in Estonia (4.9

1   Rob McRae, "Resistance and Revolution: Václav Havel's Czechoslovakia", McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997, p. 261.

2   Jan Teorell, Mariano Torcal, and Jose Ramon Montero, "Political Participation: Mapping the Terrain." In: "Citizenship and Involvement in European Democracies: A Comparative Analysis", Routledge, 2006, pp. 334–357.

3   Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair, "Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party." Party Politics, 1995, 1(1), pp. 5-28.

4   Ingrid van Biezen, Peter Mair, and Thomas Poguntke, "Going, Going, … Gone? The Decline of Party Membership in Contemporary Europe", European Journal of Political Research, 2012, 51(1), pp. 24–56.

Figure 1. Party membership as a percentage of national electorates, 2006-2009
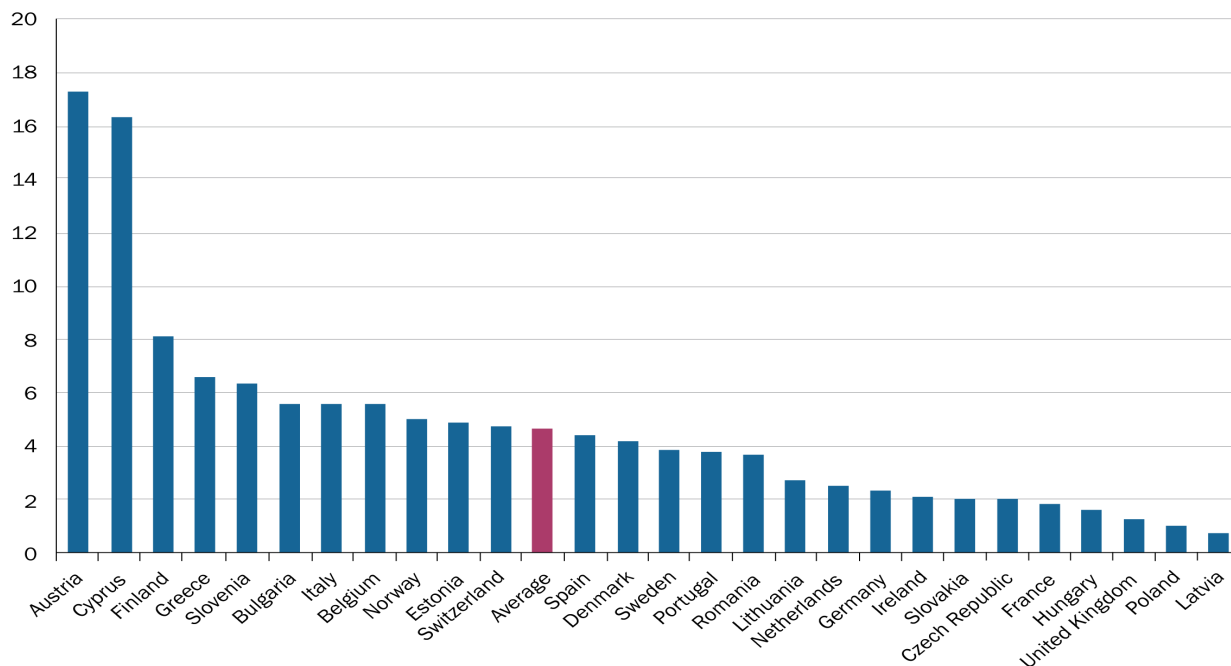
Source: Ingrid van Biezen, Peter Mair, and Thomas Poguntke, "Going, Going, ... Gone? The Decline of Party Membership in Contemporary Europe", European Journal of Political Research, 2012, 51(1), pp. 24–56.

Note: The figure for Latvia is from 2004.

percent), Bulgaria (5.6 percent), and Slovenia (6.3 percent) are close to or above the Western/Southern European level. Furthermore, the study does not include the outlier of the region, Serbia, where 13.5 percent of the electorate belongs to a party.[5]

Differences among CEE countries extend also to changes in party membership over time. When comparing membership as a percentage of the electorate between late 1990s and early 2000s, Estonia stands out as the country with the largest increase in membership, while Slovenia, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic are among those countries in which membership dropped strongly; meanwhile, in Poland membership remained roughly stable. (See Figure 2.)

The decline in party membership is even more visible when looking at the number of party members since the late 1990s. Within roughly a decade, Slovakian parties lost about half (48 percent) of their members, Czech parties lost 40 percent, Slovenian 31 percent and Hungarian 28 percent of members. In Poland, the decline was less sharp, at 6 percent of the membership base[6]. In Serbia, membership dropped by 14 percent over a comparable period (2000-2012).[7]

Explanations
The levels and dynamics of party membership in CEE countries can be explained from two perspectives: the

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5   Figure for 2016 based on membership figures reported by four main parties (DS, SNS, SPS, SRS) divided by the electorate eligible to vote in the 2016 parliamentary elections. See the case study on Serbia for more details.

6   Ingrid van Biezen, Peter Mair, and Thomas Poguntke, "Going, Going, ... Gone?"

7   Author's calculation. The figure compares absolute numbers of party membership in four main parties (DS, SNS, SPS, SRS) between 2000-2012. It should be noted that the figure for 2016 is sixteen percent higher than the 2000 level.

Figure 2. Change in ratio of party memberships to electorates, various between 1997 and 2009
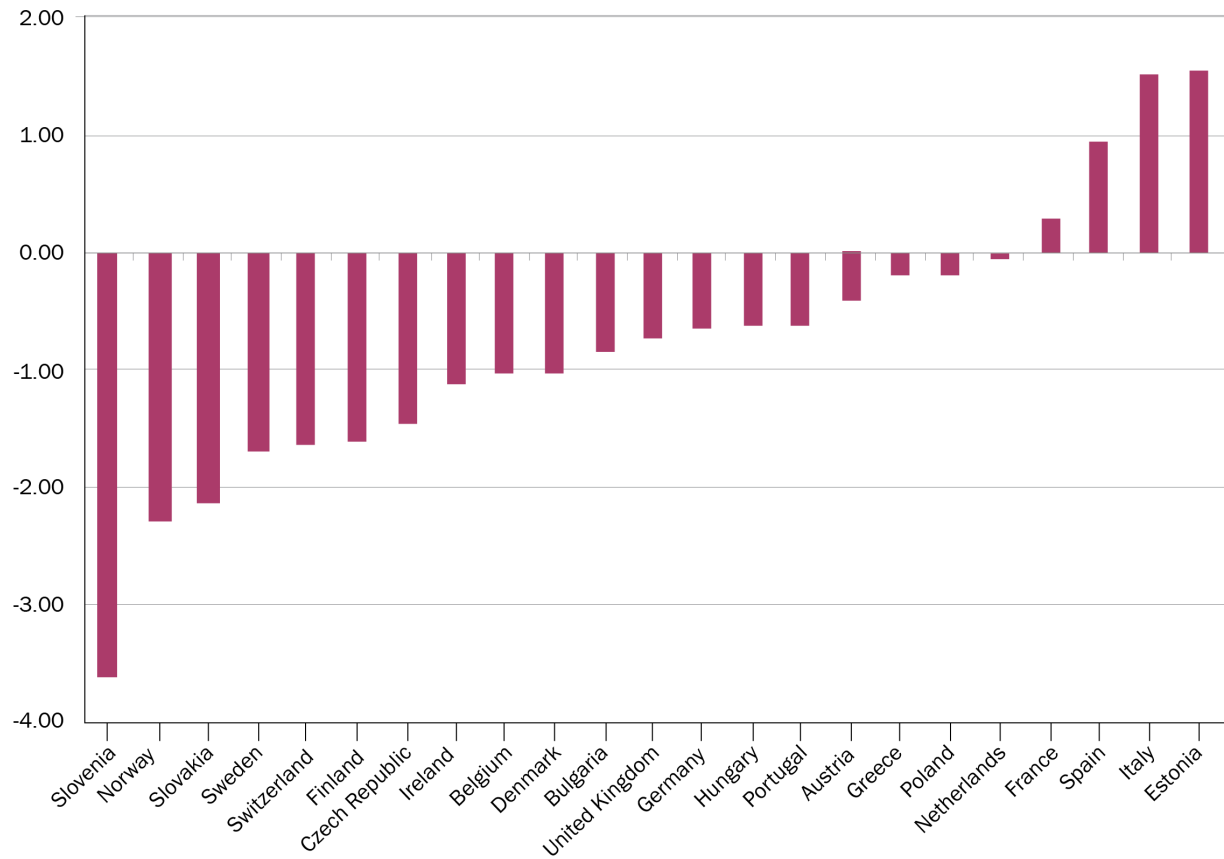
Source: Ingrid van Biezen, Peter Mair, and Thomas Poguntke, "Going, Going, ... Gone? The Decline of Party Membership in Contemporary Europe", European Journal of Political Research, 2012, 51(1), pp. 24–56.

supply side (why citizens join parties) and the demand side (why parties want to have members).

As regards the supply side, there are three key reasons for party engagement.[8]

- Collective benefits: Citizens engage with parties because they want to contribute to the implementation of a party program that serves the collective interest. This motivation is weighed with the perceived influence an individual has on achieving

this goal: the higher the influence, the higher the probability of engagement.[9]

- Individual benefits: A further motivation is what the citizen "gets out" personally. This might include gaining an elected office, enjoying party politics, or the pleasure of interacting with like-minded people.[10]
- Social norms: Finally, citizens will get engaged if they personally feel that political engagement is normatively justified (private norms), and/or if

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8   For an overview and competitive empirical testing, see Paul F. Whitely and Patrick Seyd, "Rationality and Party Activism: Encompassing Tests of Alternative Models of Political Participation", European Journal of Political Research, 1996, 29(2), pp. 215-234.

9   Mancur Olson, "The Logic of Collective Action. Public Goods and the Theory of Groups". Cambridge, 1965. Quoted after Whitely and Seyd, "Rationality and Party Activism".

10   Ibid.

other people value political engagement (public norms).[11]

The Achilles heel of party engagement in CEE is social norms. Parties evoke strongly negative associations in the societies of the region. This has to do with memories of former communist parties, but also with the chaotic party landscape of the early 1990s, which was dominated by corruption scandals, the perceived incompetence of political leaders, and the inflation in the number of parties.[12] Furthermore, positive perceptions of party engagement have hardly developed due to weak civic education as well as the individualization of societies resulting from transition processes.

As regards individual benefits, there is a mixed picture. For example, Polish citizens perceive party engagement as something risky for their careers, while Serbian citizens join parties to maximize private benefits, such as getting or keeping a job. Nevertheless, a uniting characteristic of engagement in the region is that parties are usually unable to provide their members with more than the prospect of getting into office. In contrast to established Western European parties, CEE parties do not invest substantially in educating, socializing, and networking their members. Furthermore, they are usually leader-centered organizations with limited internal democracy. This frustrates ambitious members and deters prospective members from party engagement.

Finally, the supply of engaged party activists in CEE countries is hampered by the fact that societal cleavages, as present in Western Europe, are non-existent or fuzzy. Over decades after 1945, communist parties invested significant resources into producing "classless societies" with minimal differences based on wealth, education, ethnicity, language, or religion. As a result, citizens in CEE countries find it difficult to feel strongly about any party program that would be worth their political engagement. Parties contribute to this situation by adopting vague catch-all programs designed not to alienate any social group. In fact, distinctive ideological positions are usually found only on the far-right and far-left extremes of the political spectrum.

Parties evoke strongly negative associations in the societies of the region.

When looking at the demand side, many parties in CEE deliberately decide against having a strong membership base. At first sight, this choice is counter-intuitive. Other things being equal, a higher number of members gives parties more financial resources (from membership fees), more support in electoral campaigns, a larger pool of candidates for office, and the ability to listen to citizens' preferences on the ground and to project the party's message to them. Finally, high membership legitimizes the party in the eyes of the electorate.

However, CEE political parties were created in an environment where these factors mattered less. Due to widespread public funding for political parties, membership fees account for negligible (usually single-digit) percentages of party budgets. Campaigns are carried out by public-relations agencies rather than scores of volunteers. Modern mass media and social media allow parties to reach voters without the help of members on the ground, while public-opinion polling allows them to understand citizens' preferences more or less adequately.

Furthermore, a smaller and highly professionalized organization is easier to manage. It is easier to prevent people with dubious backgrounds from joining and thereby damaging the reputation of the party; external communication can be more easily controlled; and the spoils of office (such as jobs in the public sector) can be distributed among a smaller number of party members.

11   Edward Muller, "Aggressive Political Participation", Princeton University Press, 1979. Quoted after Whitely and Seyd, "Rationality and Party Activism".

12   Aleks Szczerbiak, "Power Without Love: Patterns of Party Politics in post-1989 Poland", In: Susanne Jungerstam-Mulder (ed.), "Post-communist EU Member States: Parties and Party Systems", Aldershot and Burligton, 2006, pp. 91-124.

As a result, the average party in CEE countries operates as a "cadre party," with low membership, strong financial dependence on the state, weak internal democracy, and extraordinarily strong dominance by professional politicians.

The average party in CEE countries operates as a "cadre party."

Despite the common characteristics outlined so far, there is considerable variation in the levels and drivers of party membership in the CEE countries, as a closer look at three following characteristic cases shows.[13]

- In Poland, party membership is among the lowest among CEE countries, but this does not seem to have major negative consequences for the legitimacy and effectiveness of the democratic system
- The situation in Serbia is the opposite: a very high number of people are members of parties, but often for clientelistic reasons, which make the democratic system prone to abuse. Furthermore, the lack of a level playing field for parties makes engagement outside of the ruling party unattractive or even dangerous.
- Finally, Ukraine has a system of "virtual" party politics: genuine parties with engaged members do not play a central role in politics, in contrast with "political projects" run by powerful private interests.

Poland

The level of party membership in Poland is among the lowest in Central and Eastern Europe. According to the latest data from the Main Statistical Office, at the end of 2018 Polish parties had declared 241,000 members. This corresponds to 0.8 percent of the electorate.[14]

Table 1 shows current self-declared membership figures for the most important parties. The Polish Peasant's Party (PSL) has the strongest membership base, with roughly 100,000 members as of early 2020, although its membership declined by one-third since 2001. The Democratic Left Alliance (SLD)—the successor of the Communist Party—experienced the largest drop in membership in the period, from 87,000 in 2001 to 32,000 in 2020. By contrast, membership increased strongly for parties getting into office: Civic Platform, which formed the government between 2007 and 2014, and Law and Justice (PiS), which has been in office since 2015.

As these numbers are reported by parties, they should be treated with caution. Furthermore, being a formal party member is not the same as being an active member. To illustrate this point, just 52 percent of Civic Platform members participated in internal leadership elections in 2016. Collecting membership fees is also a challenge. For example, only 71 percent of SLD members paid their fees in 2019.[15]

There are two main explanations for the relatively low level of party membership in Poland. First, from the perspective of citizens, joining a party is unattractive due to historical reasons and to the internal organization of parties. Second, some major parties have deliberately chosen to limit their membership numbers in order to be "cadre" parties instead of mass-membership ones.

The key disincentive to join parties is their bad reputation. In 2018, 23 percent of Poles declared that they trusted political parties, 63 percent said they did not.[16] This results from memories of the Polish United Workers' Party of communist Poland, as well

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13   The case studies are based on interviews with experts and practitioners conducted in Belgrade, Kyiv and Warsaw in February 2020, as well as desk research. I am very grateful to all interviewees who supported the research with their insights.

14   Główny Urząd Statystyczny, "Partie polityczne w 2018 roku", 2019. The percentage was calculated by dividing the membership figure by the number of Poles eligible to vote in regional elections in October/November 2018.

15   Onet, "Topnieją szeregi Platformy Obywatelskiej. Duży przyrost działaczy PiS", February 2020.

16   CBOS, "O nieufności i zaufaniu, Komunikat z badań nr 5/2018", 2018.

Table 1. Reported Party Membership, Poland, 2001-2020

	2001	2005	2007	2012	2015	2020
Democratic Left Alliance (SLD)	87,000	80,000	72,000	40,000	38,000	32,000
Polish Peasant's Party (PSL)	150,000	120,000	160,000	120,000	100,000	101,000
Civic Platform	5,000	15,000	32,000	45,000	No data	32,000
Law and Justice (PiS)	2,500	6,000	22,000	23,000	20,000	40,000

Sources: Onet, "Topnieją szeregi Platformy Obywatelskiej. Duży przyrost działaczy PiS", February 2020; Sergiu Gherghina, "Party Organization and Electoral Volatility in Central and Eastern Europe: Enhancing Voter Loyalty", Routledge, 2014, pp. 1-195.

as images of the chaotic party landscape of the 1990s, which involved an inflation in the number of parties, corruption scandals, and the perceived incompetence of politicians.[17] Because of these memories, none of the leading parties today has the word "party"' in its name.

Citizens also see party membership as risky for one's career.[18] This pertains especially to employees of the public sector. Incoming governments tend to cleanse the public administration of employees perceived as loyal to their predecessors, even among the lower ranks. Therefore, membership of a party is seen as a potential threat for career prospects.

Those who nevertheless become party members complain about the emptiness of party life. Polish parties do not have a strong tradition of organizing regular meetings in local chapters, which could serve

to socialize their members. None conducts systematic political or leadership education.

Furthermore, the degree of internal democracy is highly disparate. PiS is ruled single-handedly by its leader, Jarosław Kaczyński, and ordinary party members can neither elect top officials nor decide on the party program. In contrast, the two parties with roots in communist times (SLD and PSL) allow party members to elect top officials and foresee a strong role for regional chapters. Civic Platform organized a primary for selecting parliamentary candidates in 2001 (which was partially declared void) as well as two primaries for choosing presidential candidates in 2010 and 2019, and members vote to elect its leader.

However, despite the occasional involvement of members, everyday life in parties is rather empty, unless a member wants to take up the fight to climb up in the hierarchy. As a result, active party members are usually people interested in a professional career in politics.

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17   Aleks Szczerbiak, "Power Without Love".

18   Fundacja Batorego, "Polskie partie polityczne: czy spełniają swoje funkcje?", 2012.

The low level of party membership in Poland results also from conscious strategic choices of party leaders. PiS leader Kaczyński had bad experiences in the 1990s when trying to build a mass party called Porozumienie Centrum ("Agreement of the Center"). As a result, he built PiS deliberately into a "cadre" party. Those applying for membership require two recommendations from existing members, and the overall membership number is centrally controlled. Civic Platform has also been run as a professional-ized "cadre" party. Initially, it was open to political outsiders—such as experts and activists without much political experience—but over time it developed selec-tion procedures favoring party members with previous political experience.[19]

The low level of party membership in Poland results also from conscious strategic choices of party leaders.

There are multiple reasons for these choices. First, parties rely predominantly on state funding, with membership fees making up less than 10 percent of their income.[20] Second, campaigning is carried out by professional public-relations agencies and does not require significant input from members. Third, a small, professionalized party organization is easier to steer.

In contrast, the SLD and PSL aim at mass member-ship, which is enabled by the assets they inherited from communist times. The SLD has local structures of members socialized in (or sympathizing with) the communist past, and the PSL can rely on clientelistic networks in rural areas, as well as linkages with the association of voluntary firefighters.

The limited political involvement of Poles can be explained by two additional dimensions. First, there is a strong contrast between national and local politics.

Local self-government is the most trusted political institution, with 65 percent of Poles declaring trust in local governors, in contrast to 44 percent for the national government.[21]

As a result, there is no shortage of candidates in local politics. In 2018, 184,000 candidates competed for approximately 49,000 positions in local councils and executive functions.[22] However, up to 85 percent of local politicians run as "independent citizens" without official affiliation with national parties. In the 2018 local elections, candidates not affiliated with major national parties won 75 percent of presidencies in larger cities, 85 percent of mayoralties in smaller cities, and 75 percent of village mayoralties.[23] While this has the detrimental effect of deepening distrust toward parties, it is a rational move. A non-partisan candidate avoids the negative reputation of parties. He or she can be more independent in his decisions and is secure when the central government changes.

Secondly, party-membership figures do not reflect the significant engagement of citizens in organizations affiliated with parties. PiS has been particularly active in this area. After the Smoleńsk airplane catastrophe of 2010, interest in membership in the party surged. However, instead of accepting large numbers of new members, PiS encouraged them to create affiliated grassroots organizations, such as local clubs of *Gazeta Polska* (a nationalistic newspaper), Solidarni 2010 (a movement of citizens questioning the official version of events in the catastrophe), or Poland: Big Project (a network for younger intellectuals).

The support of these grassroots organizations, together with that from older groups affiliated with PiS has been an important source of its electoral success since 2015. The older groups are rooted in the church, in the mass-audience Radio Maryja or the scouting movement ZHR. In contrast, Civic Platform lacks a similar network of affiliated organizations, while the

19 Søren Riishøj, "The Civic Platform in Poland - the first decade", Univer-sity of Southern Denmark, 2010.

20 Adam Gendźwiłł, Grażyna Bukowska, Jacek Haman, Adam Sawicki, and Jarosław Zbieranek, "Finanse polskich partii", Fundacja Batorego, 2017.

21 CBOS, "O nieufności i zaufaniu, Komunikat z badań nr 5/2018", 2018.

22 Data from the Polish State Electoral Commission, 2018.

23 Own calculations based on data from the Polish State Electoral Commis-sion, 2018.

PSL draws its support from the associations of voluntary firefighters and of farmer's wives.

Serbia

Serbia stands out among Central and Eastern European countries due to the very high membership of political parties. Table 2 shows membership figures reported by parties. According to these numbers, in 2016 about 13.5 percent of the electorate belonged to a political party.[24]

Membership in parties correlates strongly with electoral results. The Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS)—the successor of the Communist Party—grew when it was in government between 1990 and 2000; but when Slobodan Milošević lost power, the party lost about two-thirds of its members. Similarly, membership in the Democratic Party (DS) more than doubled after it entered government in 2000. The Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) of President Aleksandar Vučić, created in 2008, grew significantly since his ascent to power in 2012.

However, these numbers do not mean a high level of genuine party engagement. The main reason for joining a party is clientelism. Party membership helps to get or keep a job in the public sector, which employs roughly 600,000 people[25] (about 10 percent of the electorate), as well as in state-controlled enterprises and private firms connected with the government. Furthermore, it helps to get things done in everyday interactions with the state; for instance, when getting a permit or a public service. Clientelistic relations have a long tradition in Serbia, going back to the first efforts to build an independent state in the nineteenth century.[26]

Some party members are interested in active party work in the traditional sense, but they are deterred from doing so for three reasons. First, parties lack distinctive ideologies. They prefer to keep their programs broad and vague to avoid alienating potential voters. This eliminates one of the key reasons why citizens engage with parties (the desire to support a specific political program) and leaves as the main motivation the desire to get into office.

Second, intraparty democracy is limited. Parties are run by a strong leader and his coterie, which limits the chances of promotion for other members. Moreover, the lack of democratic mechanisms means that when the party's top brass makes mistakes, there are no internal mechanisms to regain popular support through replacing leaders or shifting the program. One exception to this rule is the Democratic Party, which has constantly renewed its leadership. However, its defeated leaders have started new parties, taking with them their supporters, which still limited intraparty competition.

Third, engagement in parties other than the ruling SNS is frustrating, and in some cases dangerous, due to the use of state resources by the party to consolidate its power.[27] For instance, government-friendly television channels (including the public broadcaster RTS) and tabloids systematically provide positive coverage for the SNS while demonizing the opposition and denying it access to air time. As a result, there is no level playing field for parties: the opposition is unable to reach broader segments of the population, while information critical about the government does not reach the electorate. The electoral chances of the opposition are further limited by the system of so-called "secure votes" (also known as "capillary votes"), whereby employees of the public sector and their families are induced to vote for the ruling party

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24 Figure obtained by dividing membership figures for the four main parties (DS, SNS, SPS, SRS) in 2016 (see Table 2) by the number of Serbs eligible to vote in the 2016 parliamentary election. The figure corresponds with survey data: in one survey conducted in 2015, 15 percent of Serbians claimed to be party members.

25 Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, "Registered employment, IV quarter 2019", 2020.

26 Slobodan Cvejic (ed.), "Informal Power Networks, Political Patronage and Clientelism in Serbia and Kosovo", SeConS, 2016.

27 See Bertelsmann Stiftung, "BTI 2018 Country Report — Serbia", 2018; European Commission, "Communication on EU Enlargement Policy - Serbia 2019 Report", 2019.

Table 2. Reported Party Membership, Serbia, 1990-2016

	1990	1997	2000	2003	2007	2012	2014	2016
Democratic Party (DS)	1,000	8,000	33,000	73,000	107,000	170,000	199,000	196,000
Serbian Progressive Party (SNS)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	300,000	430,000	500,000
Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS)	190,000	490,000	710,000	260,000	155,000	180,000	190,000	195,000
Serbian Radical Party (SRS)	n/a	88,000	45,000	15,000	27,000	25,000	25,000	25,000

Source: Dušan Spasojević and Zoran Stojiljković, "Strong Leaders, Passive Members, and State-Dependency in Serbia", In: "Party Members and Their Importance in Non-EU Countries", Routledge, 2018, pp. 148-168. Rounded values for 2016.

to avoid problems at work.[28] Furthermore, there have been cases of threats and outright violence against opposition politicians, such as the beating of Borko Stefanović in November 2018.

The deteriorating state of Serbia's democracy culminated in street protests which have been ongoing since late 2018.[29] In protest, most opposition parties pledged to boycott the parliamentary election scheduled for April 2020, which was postponed to a yet unknown date due to the coronavirus epidemic.

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28   CRTA, "CRTA's Election Observation Mission Final Report: Presidential Elections 2017", 2018.

29   Maja Zivanovic, "Serbia's Wave of Protests – Key Facts", Balkan Insight, February 2019.

Table 3. Reported Party Membership, Ukraine, 2002-2017

	2002	**2007**	**2012**	**2014**	**2017**
Batkivshchyna	200,000	No data	600,000	600,000	600,000
Svoboda	No data	No data	15,000	20,000	No data
Party of Regions	500,000	700,000	1,400,000	145,000	No data
UDAR/PPB "Solidarity"	No data	No data	10,000	30,000	30,000

Source: Agnieszka K. Cianciara and Kamila Zacharuk, "The Hidden Game of Party Membership in Ukraine" In: "Party Members and Their Importance in Non-EU Countries", Routledge, 2018, pp. 169-186.

Ukraine

The membership of Ukrainian parties can be estimated through different surveys as well as by figures reported by parties. According to the World Values Survey, 1.5 percent of Ukrainians were party members in 1997, 6.4 percent in 2006 and 4.7 percent in 2011.[30] In another survey, conducted in 2015, 3.5 percent of Ukrainians declared a party membership.[31] Self-reported figures are presented in Table 3. However, they should be treated with utmost caution. To illustrate, in 2014 the Batkivshchyna party declared a membership base of 600,000, but received 895,000 votes in the parliamentary election, which suggests that party members must have accounted for two-thirds of its electorate, which is very unlikely.

Ukraine's party system does not encourage party membership. Its key characteristic is the dominance of "political projects" representing wealthy business-people (the so-called oligarchs). Given the weak rule of law, oligarchs fund such "projects" to protect their property and to promote legislation and executive decisions in line with their interests.[32]

These "political projects" differ substantially from political parties in the traditional sense. They are usually leader-centric entities launched just before elections, often by buying and rebranding inactive parties ("sleeping beauties"). They lack a membership base, internal democracy, regional branches, and distinctive ideologies. Political projects do not need members, because electoral success is determined by access to television channels and the amount of financial resources available for the campaign.

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30 Ronald Inglehart et al. (eds.), "World Values Survey: Round Six Country-Pooled Datafile Version", JD Systems Institute, 2014.

31 Democratic Initiatives Foundation, "Ставлення українців до політичних партій і джерел їх фінансування", 2015.

32 Ibid.

Figure 3. Cadre, Patronage, and Captured Democracies

Patronage Democracies	
Albania Bosnia and Herzegovina Bulgaria Croatia Kosovo North Macedonia Romania Serbia Slovenia	
Cadre Democracies	**Captured Democracies**
Czech Republic Estonia Hungary Latvia Lithuania Poland Slovakia	Moldova Ukraine

An illustrative example is Sluha Narodu (Servant of the People), the party of President Vladimir Zelensky. Until May 2019, two months before the most recent parliamentary elections, the party was virtual: it had no members, no branches, and no party activity. Nevertheless, it scored a landslide victory, gaining an absolute majority in Ukraine's parliament.

Zelensky benefited from public discontent with his predecessor and from his personal popularity as comedian in a show broadcast over many years on the television channel 1+1, which is owned by the oligarch Ihor Kolomoyskyi. His party ran on an anti-establishment platform (with the key slogan: "Let's do them togeth-

er").[33] Since the election, it has shifted its ideology from libertarianism[34] to "Ukrainian centrism"[35] without defining either of these terms. Membership figures are unknown. An expert interviewed for this paper estimates it at about 800 members.

This situation is frustrating for the few parties that invest in a membership base (such as Batkivshchyna), as well as for numerous political start-ups that decide not to accept support from oligarchic interests (such as Sila Lyudey). In one survey which ranked the twenty most active political parties in Ukraine in 2019, Batkivshchyna came first, thanks to its regional activities and its program work.[36] However, the party received only 8 percent of votes in the 2019 elections. Sila Lyudey, one of several young, liberally oriented parties without oligarchic backing, received 0.19 percent of the vote.

In short, attempts to build parties that fulfil traditional roles and could provide platforms of genuine party engagement in Ukraine are frustrated by the fact that wealthy individuals control TV channels and campaign finance, the key resources to attain any significant level of popularity.

Boosting Party Engagement

The cases of Poland, Serbia, and Ukraine show considerable variation in reasons for the level of party engagement, despite some commonalities present across the CEE countries. Thus, measures aiming to boost party engagement should be tailored to address specific country contexts. Specifically, the CEE countries can be divided into three clusters of those sharing similar

33 Joanna Hosa and Andrew Wilson, "Zelensky Unchained: What Ukraine's New Political Order Means for its Future", European Council on Foreign Relations, 2019.

34 Maxim Edwards, "Welcome to Ukraine's Post-Post-Maidan Era", Foreign Policy, July 2019.

35 Daryna Antoniuk, "Servant of the People Party Announces Lawmaker Education, Media Strategy, Ideology", KyivPost, February 2020.

36 International Centre for Policy Studies, "РЕЙТИНГ АКТИВНОСТІ ТА ЕФЕКТИВНОСТІ ПОЛІТИЧНИХ ПАРТІЙ УКРАЇНИ", 2019.

barriers to party engagement: cadre democracies, patronage democracies, and captured democracies.

Cadre Democracies

Poland is the archetypical cadre democracy, but broadly similar characteristics can be found in the Baltic states, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia.

These countries are characterized by low levels of party membership (even less than 1 percent of the electorate, as in Latvia and Poland). This results largely from conscious choices of political parties, which prefer to be cadre organizations, dominated by professional politicians, with varying degrees of internal democracy, from limited (mostly) to advanced (rarely). Furthermore, low party engagement is rooted in negative memories of the former communist parties, as well as the chaotic party landscapes of early 1990s.

In this group, it is important to look beyond party membership figures, however. In Poland, for instance, distrust and low engagement in national parties go hand-in-hand with trust and high engagement in local politics, albeit mostly outside of parties. Furthermore, the state of political engagement is less critical when considering engagement in organizations affiliated with parties. Finally, it should be noted that parties in this group of countries, despite being small, are relatively successful when it comes to delivering policy outcomes and participating in demanding decision-making processes in the EU and NATO.

Boosting party engagement in this group of countries requires some regulatory changes, even though the required adjustments are rather incremental. First, regulation could incentivize parties to grow their membership. For instance, if part of their state funding depended on how much they generate from membership fees (a matched funding scheme similar to the one in Germany), parties might think more about making themselves more attractive to prospective members. State funding could also be made conditional upon having at least basic standards of intraparty democracy. Finally, an Achilles heel of these parties is the weakness of their educational and analytical work. A

part of state subsidies could be earmarked for activities in these areas.

Second, a striking finding about the perception of parties in this region is that their reputation is usually lowest among young people.[37] Thus, the most skeptical group is not the one that had direct contact with the former communist parties, but the one which was socialized entirely in a post-transition context. Experts point out that this has to do with insufficient attention given in the last decades to formal civic education at schools, as well as to informal civic education targeted at all age groups. They suggest that there is a need to strengthen both strands in the future. The work carried in Germany by the Federal Agency for Civic Education could serve as one example.[38]

> *Boosting party engagement in this group of countries requires some regulatory changes, even though the required adjustments are rather incremental.*

Furthermore, party engagement could be boosted by changes implemented by parties themselves. One underexplored approach is that of "multispeed membership": new forms of engagement that are more nuanced than the binary choice of being or not being a party member. According to the academic Susan Scarrow, citizens could be offered different structured opportunities to engage with political parties: as traditional individual members, as "light" members, as cyber members, as sustainers, as social-media followers and friends, and as members of a news audience—in a system that is centralized, accessible, and digital.[39] In Poland, the most ambitious experiment in this regard was recently carried out by Konfederacja (a

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37 For Poland, see CBOS, "Stosunek do instytucji państwa oraz partii politycznych po 25 latach, Komunikat badań CBOS nr 68/2014", 2014.

38 Website of the German Federal Agency for Civic Education, 2020.

39 Susan Scarrow, "Beyond Party Members: Changing Approaches to Partisan Mobilization", Oxford University Press, 2015.

coalition of far-right Eurosceptic parties) which organized primaries open to all interested citizens willing to support the party with a small donation.[40]

There is also a widespread perception among experts that international donors deprioritized the countries in this cluster too early. While the Visegrad and Baltic states made quick progress in improving the quality of democracy to gain EU accession, the recent history of some of these countries shows that progress can be rolled back quickly. The ease of this rollback has something to do with characteristics of party systems and societal interest in party engagement. Leader-centered parties with limited internal democracy operating in fairly young democracies might find themselves tempted to build one-party states, as there are limited legal and political constraints against such moves. If donors care about the sustainability of democratic governance in this group of countries, they can focus on, among others, strengthening political parties' ability to be representative and effective simultaneously, and supporting formal and informal civic education.

> **European party families can do more to convince their members to observe democratic norms.**

The European Union and European party families have a role to play in this. The EU can react to violations of democratic norms in member states retroactively, as it has done through the Article 7 procedure and infringement procedures. However, it is equally important to prevent violations from happening in the first place; for instance, by implementing and funding adequately a Rights and Values Instrument that will support civil society organizations promoting European values.[41] Furthermore, European party families

can do more to convince their members to observe democratic norms.

Patronage Democracies

The patronage democracies in Central and Eastern Europe encompass Serbia and other countries in the Western Balkans, as well as Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovenia. Their core characteristic is the presence of historically rooted clientelistic relations between citizens and political parties.

In Serbia, for instance, party membership is very high, but it does not translate into a political system delivering representation and effectiveness. Parties lack distinct ideologies and internal democracy, and they find themselves in an unequal fight against a ruling party that uses state resources to consolidate power. Citizens join political parties mainly to gain clientelistic benefits, such as getting or keeping a job, rather than to influence public policy.

As a result, Serbian citizens interested in genuine party engagement face many barriers. Given vague party programs, it is difficult to choose with which party to engage. Engagement is frustrating because of limited prospects for advancing through the internal ranks of a party. And for those engaged with opposition parties it is frustrating to lead an unequal fight against a ruling party that uses state resources heavily. Finally, due to political violence, engagement can be outright dangerous.

While not all countries in this group are characterized by similarly far-reaching barriers to party engagement, the Serbian case can serve as an illustration of the relative ease with which deeply rooted clientelism can be exploited by one party to capture the state. Clearly, the most important measure for boosting engagement is to create framework conditions safeguarding a level playing field for all parties. This includes, among others, fair access to the media, fair elections, and ending political violence. This would reduce disincentives for engagement. Similarly, a reform of electoral legislation seems needed, as the current system (with a single electoral district for the

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40   Wikipedia, 2019–20 Confederation presidential primary, 2020.

41   See for example Israel Butler, "Brief Overview and Analysis of Tools Available to the EU to Protect Pluralist Democracy, the Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights", 2019.

entire country and closed lists) discourages political competition based on solid local engagement.[42]

However, even without legislative and regulatory changes, parties could take steps to become more attractive. Boosting internal democratic procedures is one way. Another is the development of effective public-policy proposals and distinctive ideological programs. In this area, international organizations supporting party development—such as the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, and the German political foundations—can play a role by continuing their work to develop the organizational skills and analytical capacities of parties and their networks. This includes commissioning studies on national and local public-policy problems, and debating them with relevant stakeholders. Donors can also continue to help strengthen civic education in order to give young people the chance to learn about democratic political competition, and to support civil society organizations that promote democratic values. One Serbian example is CRTA, an NGO that monitors elections and the work of the parliament, runs media campaigns, and educates community leaders.[43]

The European Union could be a driving force behind the pro-democratic development of the non-EU countries in this cluster.

The European Union could be a driving force behind the pro-democratic development of the non-EU countries in this cluster. However, its role is perceived critically by experts from the region and outside it. The EU's leverage is limited in countries without membership prospects, and its reputation has been damaged by the back-and-forth in the accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. Furthermore, in the case of Serbia, the EU is criticized by opposition parties for prioritizing progress in the country's relations with Kosovo over safeguarding democracy. Serbian opposition critics argue that the EU allows President Vučić to present himself as having good relations with the West while enacting measures that undermine democratic values. The European party families can also play a supporting role in convincing member parties from the region to observe democratic standards.

Captured Democracies

Finally, Ukraine and Moldova can be classified as captured democracies, in which parties do not play a central role in politics. A handful of parties do meaningful work and invest in their membership bases; but in this type of system such traditional, long-term party activity is not rewarded. To win elections, a party needs airtime on television and huge amounts of campaign finance, two resources controlled by wealthy individuals who support parties in return for the promotion of their private interests. This state of affairs has been present since independence of 1991, and seems to be difficult to change. In Moldova, resistance to change is similarly high, with the country undergoing a period of dominance by a single wealthy individual, punctured in 2019 by the clash between pro-reformist and status-quo forces which continues until today.

There is some hope that legislative and regulatory changes in Ukraine since the Euromaidan revolution of 2014 might lead to a gradual transformation of its party landscape:

- Public financing for political parties has been in place since the 2019 parliamentary elections: parties that cross the threshold of 2 percent of votes are eligible for statutory funding and a partial refund of campaign costs. The level of subsidies is nowhere close to the lavish sums spent by oligar-

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42   Center for Free Elections and Democracy, "Recommendations for an Electoral System", 2015.

43   Website of CRTA, 2020.

chic interests, but this is a step in the right direction, especially for political start-ups.[44]

- A new electoral code, in place from 2023, will introduce elements of open-list proportional representation for parliamentary elections (voters will be able to vote for individual candidates instead of just for a party list). While it remains to be seen how this plays out in practice,[45] this change might incentivize parties to select candidates who are genuinely popular and engaged in their community, at the cost of the current practice where safe spots on electoral lists are bought by wealthy individuals.

- Decentralization reforms enacted since 2014 have moved significant financial resources and decision-making powers to the local level. While local politics have been dominated by informal power networks of wealthy individuals, the reform might induce more Ukrainians to get engaged in genuine party politics at the local level.[46]

Ukraine also has a rich scene of civil society organizations involved directly or indirectly in politics. These act as watchdogs (such as Chesno, Opora, the Committee of Voters), advocate policy ideas (such as Reanimation Package of Reforms, Centr.UA), engage in civic education (such as EIDOS), and build leadership networks (such as the School of Political Studies). One side-effect of their work is the preparation of the next generation of political leaders. However, it is important to note that the impact of Ukraine's civil society organizations is limited by its insufficient access to the mass media and its strong clustering in Kyiv. International donors would be well-advised to continue supporting their work.

In captured democracies, "genuine" parties are usually unable to wrest power away from wealthy individuals. Even if they manage to implement best practices of party work (such as setting up sensible programs, building local structures, recruiting talented members), the lack of access to the media and finance means that they have a limited chance to compete in elections on a fair basis. As a result, the European Union, the European party families and representatives of key powerful EU and other countries play an important role in safeguarding a level playing field. The obvious challenge lies in balancing the promotion of European values with the need to work with existing power structures.

Conclusion

In Central and Eastern Europe, hardly any political party uses the word "party" in its name. This reflects popular discontent with party politics, rooted in memories of communism, as well as more recent memories of parties as organizations promoting partisan instead of public interests. This is worrying given the important role parties play for the quality of representative democracy. The reasons for limited party engagement in the CEE countries are diverse. A look at party membership across the region shows low and decreasing numbers, but this situation is at least partially due to the fact that many parties decide against building large membership bases.

The CEE countries can be divided into three clusters defined by key barriers to party engagement: cadre democracies, patronage democracies, and captured democracies. In all three groups, boosting party engagement requires a tailored approach. This can be done by implementing measures drawn from the overarching toolbox presented below, which includes civic education, the adaptation of parties, regulatory changes, and the creation of fair framework conditions for parties. The implementation of these measures can be supported by international donors, the EU, and the European party families.

Overall, the picture is not as pessimistic as it might seem by looking at levels of engagement and

44 Andreas Umland and Miriam Kosmehl, "Ukraine Introduces State Financing for Political Parties: A Promising Reform or Cosmetic Change?" Harvard International Review, 2016.

45 Nazar Boyko, "Understanding Electoral Reform in Ukraine: How to Open Party Lists While Keeping Them Closed?" PONARS Eurasia, 2020.

46 Andreas Umland, Valentyna Romanova, "Ukraine's Decentralization Reforms Since 2014: Initial Achievements and Future Challenges", Chatham House, 2019.

key barriers in the three clusters. Over the last three decades, CEE countries have developed a reservoir of citizens interested (or potentially interested) in genuine party engagement. Necessary regulatory changes are well known, and so are adaptation strategies for parties and the ways in which donors, the EU and European parties can provide support. All it takes is awareness about the necessity of healthy party engagement and the will to improve it.

Recommendations

Overall, party engagement in the CEE countries can be boosted by implementing measures drawn from the following toolbox.

Strengthening Civic Education

One of the measures to address the bad reputation of parties in the CEE countries lies in strengthening civic education—formal at educational institutions and informal outside of educational institutions. Local civil society organizations specializing in this area are important partners.

Promoting the Adaptation of Parties

Political parties should think about adapting their structures and modes of operation to make engagement more attractive for citizens, while simultaneously being electorally effective. This could include the following measures.

- Crafting distinctive and analytically solid party programs which can give citizens an indication as to which parties correspond to their individual political preferences.
- Improving internal democracy so that prospective party members see that their engagement will influence choices regarding personnel and policy proposals.
- Experimenting with new forms of membership, such as multispeed membership, to account for citizens' changing preferences regarding political engagement.

- Improving links with organizations promoting similar (sectoral) interests.

Improving the Legislative and Regulatory Environment for Parties

Two families of regulations seem crucial in this respect.

- Electoral legislation determines the internal lives of parties and therefore their attractiveness for members. Other things being equal, regulatory features rewarding the hands-on work of politicians in local constituencies (based on single-member districts or open lists) incentivize parties to recruit and promote members with the skills and motivation to improve public policy.
- To deter the influence of private interests in politics, regulations on party finance should guarantee a sufficient level of state funding, available also for political start-ups not yet represented in parliament. State funding could also be used as an incentive to make parties more member-friendly; for instance, by making public funding dependent on their level of income from membership fees, or by tying public funding to adequate levels of internal democracy.

Safeguarding Fair Framework Conditions

Party-political engagement will not be attractive for citizens if it is dangerous. Furthermore, citizens are deterred from engagement if it seems futile due to the lack of a level playing field for parties. The following steps should be considered.

- Preventing political violence, which includes outright physical violence against politicians as well as more nuanced forms such as hate speech and targeted defamation in the media.
- Building a pluralistic media landscape, including strong and independent state media, which would give political parties an equally fair chance to promote their programs.

- Preventing electoral violations, especially where the ruling party uses the state apparatus to gain favorable electoral results.

The crucial actors in those four areas are domestic political parties, civil society organizations and the general public. This does not rule out advice and support by international donors such as political foundations. They can act in all fields by, for example, supporting civic education, fostering the adaptation of parties, disseminating best practices of party regulation, and advocating fair framework conditions. While the donor community is in many cases already involved in these fields, it is important to stress the relevance of their continuing engagement and encourage its long-term character.

Furthermore, progress on the most difficult issues of political competition can be supported by the European Union, through its enlargement policies and specific programs, and the European party families, which can and should use their leverage on the members to promote a level playing field for political parties.

About the Author

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As Central and Eastern Europe faces mounting challenges to its democracy, security, and prosperity, fresh intellectual and practical impulses are urgently needed in the region and in the West broadly. For this reason, GMF established the ReThink.CEE Fellowship that supports next-generation policy analysts and civic activists from this critical part of Europe. Through conducting and presenting an original piece of policy research, fellows contribute to better understanding of regional dynamics and to effective policy responses by the transatlantic community

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