

WHY DO POLITICAL PARTIES FAIL?

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ABSTRACT: An analytical Framework to identify the general causes of party decline and collapse in Eastern and Central Europe is developed in this article. The causes of a parties failure are divided into those connected with its institutionalization (internal and external) and those independent of the party.

KEYWORDS: party institutionalisation, party collapse, political transformation

The emergence and development of political parties and their models and functions have been the subject of many researches. Party collapse, however, is analysed very rarely. This is because 'party failure, in any absolute or quasi-absolute sense, is a rare phenomenon' (Pridham 1988: 230). The collapse of a party is usually ascribed either to 'exceptional circumstances, such as the very evident failure of a political system or calamitous war' or else it is seen as an 'unsolved mystery of politics' (Padró-Solanet 1996: 462).

When analysing political party failure in democratic systems, two phenomena can be distinguished. First, the general failure of a party as a fundamental institution of a modern political system and second, the failure of a particular party in the party system of a single country. These are two separate, but possibly connected, phenomena of politics. Supporters of the thesis of party failure as a general phenomenon argue that parties are becoming less connected to society and thus do not fulfil their traditional functions. As a consequence they are less effective. Societies themselves are getting more fragmented, individualized and in consequence the ties between the parties and their supporters are getting

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looser (Scarrow 2010: 257–280, Withley 2011: 21–44, Paczeński, Winclawska 2013: 5–14, Materska-Sosnowska 2013: 343–354). Furthermore new alternative organizations form, such as new social movements, single-issue movements or special interest groups (Lawson, Merkl 1988: 3–12). These are believed to link citizens to the decision-making process in a manner which is more satisfactory and effective. However, as Peter Mair states, the thesis that parties are *passé* is not justified (Mair 2002: 126). All these issues can admittedly weaken the parties defined in Maurice Duverger and Sigmunt Neuman's tradition as 'mass' organizations or can even create favourable conditions for the failure of individual parties, but certainly do not determine the collapse of political parties in general. Changes in the models of political parties are parallel to the changes of their environment or, in a wider context, with the changes of the socio-political realm. Modifications in parties' organization and of their functions over time, do not imply their weakness, but the opposite – they prove their ability to adapt and respond to the requirements of developing political and social systems.

Any analysis of the second phenomenon, that is the failure of a single party, should not be based on the thesis of party crisis in modern democracies, but rather concentrate on the internal and external causes of a party's instability in a given system. So, it should try to answer the question of why a stable party, which in at least two consecutive elections¹ got enough support to have had parliamentary representation and had had coalition potential, later loses that support and, in consequence, collapses.

Not many studies have been conducted on the issue of a single party failure. I have found only three such cases. The first, is about the collapse of the Spanish Union of the Democratic Centre (UCD), by Jonathan Hopkin. His research focuses mainly on the organizational problems of the party and on the disintegration of the UCD party elite caused by its members' ambitions (Hopkin 1999: 9–35). Piero Ingazi and Spencer Wellhofer are the authors who analyzed the causes of failure of the Italian Christian Democrats (DC). They see the causes of the party's collapse in the socio-economic and cultural changes that took place in Italy over the previous 50 years, especially in the secularization of Italian society and in the structural changes in owner occupied agricultural holdings (Ingazi, Wellhoffer 2008). The last study is by Ivor Crewe and Anthony King on

¹ A stable party in this paper is defined as one, that in two consecutive elections got into the parliament and had either coalitional or blackmail potential. This criteria seems right, because only few elections took place in countries of this region over the last 20 years of democracy.

the British Social Democratic Party (SDP), ‘that went up like a rocket but came down like a stick’. The authors look for an answer to the question ‘why was the SDP a failure?’ Why, in spite of very favourable circumstances, such as building up a professional national organization, low support for both major parties (Conservative and Labour), ‘partisan dealignment’ that took place in the British electorate the beginning of the eighties (Crewe, King 1995: vii, 455–456), did the party never get enough support to put more representatives into parliament as to ‘exceed a handful’² or to become a serious challenge to the two major parties even in local elections.

All three of these parties, that is: Union of the Democratic Centre, Christian Democrats and the Social Democratic Party, collapsed. Each of them functioned in a different political system and in different circumstances. The SDP had to challenge the ‘first-past-the post’ system, which is an extremely difficult task and it failed to do so very quickly. The UCD emerged during the democratization process in Spain after the Francisco Franco dictatorship as an alliance of (too) many diverged fractions of the Spanish opposition. And the DC faced profound changes in Italian society, to which, as it turned out, it could not stand up. What conclusions can be drawn from these three case studies? What can we learn from them in order to build a party failure model and to try it against the party failure in post-communist Europe?

A single party collapse can be analysed in two aspects: legal and factual. From a legal point of view, a party ceases to exist when it is crossed out from the political party registry. This can be done only when the party fails to fulfil its legal obligations³. In a factual way, the party fails when, in consecutive elections it does not get enough support to get into parliament or other elective institutions (such as the president office, local councils or international organizations such as the European Parliament). The next stage of the process of party collapse takes

² I use the term ‘exceed a handful’ after Robert Harmel and Lars Svåsand. I do it to imply that the SDP did not pass all three stages of institutionalization introduced by those authors, these are: identification, organization and stabilization. It seems that the party went only through the first stage of identification, and did not manage to move much beyond it. (Harmel, Svåsand 1993: 67–88).

³ The legal obligations the party has to fulfill differ from country to country. For example in Poland the party has to produce a financial report each year. If the party fails to do so, the State Electoral Commission has the right to ask the court to cross out the party from the party’s registry. In Germany the party has to take part in elections. If it fails to do so in six years, the party ceases to exist in a legal way. In Finland it is enough if the party does not have enough support in two consecutive elections to get its representatives into the legislative bodies.

place when the party encounters difficulties in completing the electoral lists in the next elections. Finally, the party has one of the following four options. First, members of the party, according to the party constitution, can decide to disband the organization. Second, the party can survive as a cosy party. Third it can try to transform into a different organization, by changing its name, attracting new politicians, adopta modified political manifesto or simply by uniting with a different political party. Fourth, the members of the party can be offered attractive exit options, for example governmental posts or places on the electoral lists of different organizations.

In order to analyse a single party collapse I distinguished two types of causes of party failure: internal and external. For internal causes the party can be blamed, while external are to a large extent independent of the organization. These are the changes that take place in the party's environment.

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL CAUSES OF PARTY FAILURE

Internal causes of party failure are directly connected with the process of party institutionalization. In order to understand this process and to explain it in Eastern and Central Europe I draw from three theories reconstructing it in western democracies. First, is the theory of Samuel Huntington (1965: 386–430), second of Angelo Panebianco (1988) and third of Robert Harmel and Lars Svåsand (1993: 67–88). On the basis of these three conceptions I have sketched a model of party institutionalization in this part of Europe. This process must be slightly different and more complex from the party institutionalization in the West, because changes that have been taking place in this region since 1989 are fast and profound⁴. It means that the party must not only change (consolidate, develop) from the inside, but it also needs to react very quickly to external (environmental) changes: legal, political and social.

To analyse the process of party institutionalization in this part of Europe we need the following criteria: (1) systemness (cohesiveness), by which I understand cohesive norms, depersonalised procedures, routinization and conformity of power structure in the party with the party constitution, (2) value infusion,

⁴ See the concept of 'triple transition' Clause Offe (1991: 865–892). See also M. Grabowska (2006: 231–273).

understood after Samuel Huntington, as the situation when the party becomes ‘valued for its own sake’ (Huntington 1965: 397), (3) adaptability of the party to its environment and to the changes that take place inside the organization, (4) autonomy, (5) public recognition (name, leaders, ideology, etc.), (6) reputation for credibility and dependability (for example in a coalition’s negotiations). These criteria can be divided into two pairs: structural and psychological; and internal and external. They can also be applied to the phases of party development introduced by Harmel and Svåsand, these are: identification, organization and stabilization (Harmel, Svåsand 1993: 67–88). In order to recognize a party as an institution all of the above criteria should be fulfilled and all three stages of institutionalization completed. Analytically we can try to assign these criteria to the phases of party development. This is shown in figure 1.

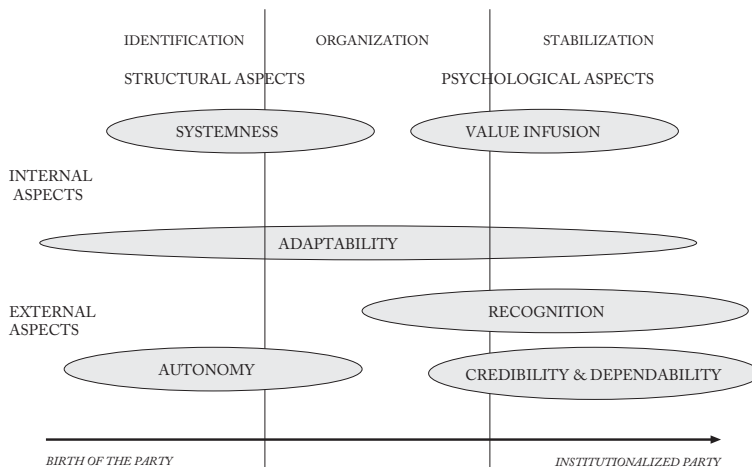


Figure 1. Process of party institutionalisation

Structural aspects (both internal and external) of party institutionalization are more important from the birth of the party through the phase of identification up to the phase of organization. At that time the party must develop procedures, adopt an organizational style and divide assignments and responsibility between three ‘faces of party organization’, these are party in central office, party on the ground and party in public office (Katz, Mair 1993: 593–617). It also has to become independent from other organizations or institutions which could influence the

party politics⁵. Psychological aspects of party institutionalization become more important in later stages of the process. Value infusion, getting public recognition and becoming credible and dependable in the eyes of other political actors are the main tasks for the party in the phases of organization and stabilization.

Low systemness is one of the causes of party collapse. It can be attributed to two factors. The first one is low or no coherence between the parties constitution (its norms and procedures) and every day party praxis. The power in the party is personalised and decisions are made not on the basis of internal regulations but depending on circumstances. The second one is division of the party into fractions. Different parts of the organization compete with each other for power, and to make their program central for the whole organization. This causes chaos in the parties offer⁶, the electorate does not know where the party stands on important as well as controversial issues. It also causes many devastating fights and disagreements between party members and activists, which can lead to a split.

A lack of internal coherence can also be a result of poor party leadership. If the leader is strong and charismatic he/she gathers more followers and believers than supporters. This type of a leader has the ability to mobilize the partyies masses with his charisma, but on the other hand, his/hers leadership is an ephemeral phenomena, which routinise in time (Sztompka 2002: 171). A party dominated by strong and seemingly irreplaceable leadership, is prone to lose supporters and members, and finally collapse, because there was nothing, no norms, procedures or values, beside the leader to bind the party together.

If leaders and members of the party do not value it for its own sake, but rather see it as a means to attaining certain goals in politics, the stability of the organization is also challenged. There are at least two dangers connected with low value infusion. First and less probable, is when the goal of the party has already been attained and the organization is not functional any more. The other danger is connected with the ambitions of party leaders and its other politicians. They can seek power and posts in spite of the party's poor performance in elections. And if electoral support is relatively low and these ambitious party activists are not offered enough incentives (Wellhofer, Hennessey 1974: 135–165) they may look for 'exit options', like joining a different party with a similar ideological profile,

⁵ For example institutions that were founding organizations for the party, such as labour unions, churches, etc.

⁶ For example this was the case with the Spanish Union of Democratic Centre, which was an Alliance of 15 organizations (Hopkin 1999: 3).

but with greater electoral support, getting a government post from a different party, or establishing a new organization, especially when the cost of entering the electoral market is relatively low and the chances of success are relatively high⁷. As Jonathan Hopkin put it: 'the more feasible a participant's exit options, the more difficult it is for the party to maintain its participation during 'hard times' in which benefits are unavailable' (Hopkin 1999: 21). This situation threatens the party stability or even its existence in the longer term.

Another aspect of party institutionalization – adaptability – causes controversy. Vicky Randall and Lars Svåsand see it as a consequence of a process rather than its cause (Randall, Svåsand 2002: 15). In my opinion however, adaptability is not only, as they indicate, the effect of institutionalization, but also its important facilitator, especially in a very changeable environment. In order to be successful, a party needs to have the ability to react properly to changes that take place both inside the organization (for example: splintering of the party, unification of two or more organizations or struggle for leadership) and on the outside, in party or political and social systems (the birth of a new political party, the collapse of a party, changes in law, etc.).

Besides internal causes of party failure we can identify external ones which can be divided into two groups. First one consists of the external causes of party failure that match the external aspects of party institutionalization, these are: a lack or loss of autonomy, credibility or dependability (partially dependent on the party's behaviour). Second is external to the party. If the party is dependent on another organization (financially or structurally), the organization may try to influence the party's politics. If the party denies it, it may lose the support of the 'sponsor'. If it accepts this dependence it is likely to act as the 'sponsor' wishes. The second situation puts the party reliability in danger in the eyes of other political actors and of its members and supporters. Another danger is that the sponsoring organization can become displeased with the party's behaviour or find another organization that would better suit its interest, in which case it may withdraw support from the original party. Finally, the party can lack or lose its credibility and dependability. This can happen as a result of irresponsible behaviour of the party, embarrassment of its leaders, or the unpopular or vague decisions the party makes.

⁷ See for example initiatives to establish the British SDP (after all unsuccessful) or Polish Civic Platform (PO) or Law and Justice (PiS) - both successful.

Party failure may also be caused by issues totally outside the party, resulting from social and socio-political changes. The first of these changes, is a devaluation of the party's ideology. As it was, for example, with the communist or fascist doctrines. The disappearance of or profound changes in social categories that have supported the party is another cause of a party failure. This cause was more important in the past when parties were mainly mass organizations representing certain constituencies, but still has not lost its relevance completely. The party whose social base is getting short has to transform itself by broadening or changing its political program and appeal. If it fails to do so in time, it is likely to lose electoral support and in consequence to collapse. Among parties that faced this problem have been socialist parties which became less popular after the introduction of the welfare state and due to a falling number of blue collar workers. Religious parties have been in that group since religiosity declines, or rural parties because of the falling number of farmers. In this category we can also find parties formed by the intelligentsia in Eastern and Central Europe after 1989.

Finally, fluctuations in electoral turnout may be the cause of a party failure. Especially in young democracies, whole statistically homogeneous groups can enter or leave the electoral market. If a group, for whatever reason, decides not to take part in elections or decides to vote for a different party, the organization which was originally supported by that group may not get enough votes to get into parliament⁸.

To sum up, in order to become a stable organization a party must go through the process of institutionalization. It means that it must go through all three phases of this process (identification, organization and stabilization) and must become an organization with a high level of systemness, autonomy, value infusion, credibility, dependability and be easily recognized and identified by the public. Last but not least, it needs to become an adaptable organization. This is crucial in this region during transformation, because changes are profound and rapid. If the party is not able to react to internal and external changes in time, it is likely that even a relevant party, will lose support, become marginalized and thus fail.

⁸ For example electoral success of Polish Civic Platform (2007) was due to mobilization of young voters – a group whose turnout in past elections was relatively low.

CONCLUSIONS

Many organizations rise and collapse, just as political ones. They are especially vulnerable in new democracies, when the state undergoes its transition. Many political initiatives do not even become recognisable by the wider public and never have a chance to get into parliament, while others take part in one or two elections and dissolve or disappear from the political arena. Out of a multitude of political parties only a few become relevant and are active in politics for a longer time. If one of these parties collapses, which is a relatively rare phenomenon since well established parties are rather adaptable organizations (Pridham 1988: 230), the question arises as to why it happened. The answer is never simple. It is always a conglomerate of divergent – internal and external causes and some direct circumstances which must all be analysed. This type of research enables us to notice, how directly and profoundly social change affects politics and it also makes us aware of how a party should be organized and how quickly it should react to the changing environment in order to institutionalise and survive.

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