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Stability in the shadow of chaos. The Hungarian party system in 2006

The fundamental message of the 2006 parliamentary election was that the structure of the Hungarian party system is stable. The established parties are similar to good soldiers: they are disciplined, loyal to friends, and ruthless to enemies. Few of them are still around, but no newcomer can join their ranks. While they often fail in their governmental tasks, they reemerge in the electoral campaigns as the accepted representatives of the hopes and fears of the society. Their stability and their monopoly over political representation provides good conditions for the responsible party model and for accountability. The rigidity of their coalition preferences guarantees that the composition of the government depends on the public will expressed at the election. Although two personalities (Orbán and Gyurcsány) have dominated the 2006 campaign, and the ideology of the parties is somewhat idiosyncratic from a European perspective, there can be little doubt that Hungarian parties operate a well-consolidated party system. On the downside, the concentration of the party system has weakened its ability to mirror social heterogeneity and the intensive, polarized party competition has undermined long term governmental rationality.

Below I will qualify the points made above by analyzing separately the fragmentation of the party system, the structure of the party alliances, the ideological space of the party system, the organizational features of the parties, the 'partyness' of the society and the government, and the logic of party competition. I will fit the developments under the 2002-2006 parliament into the larger picture of post-communist politics and grasp the most solid features of the Hungarian party politics by contrasting it with European trends. Finally, I will also briefly venture into a normative evaluation of the performance of the party system.

1. Fragmentation

European party systems are becoming increasingly fragmented (Keman and Krowel 2006). Traditional parties loose ground to new - typically radical and small - parties. That brings West and East closer to each other, since the post-communist party systems used to be (and partly they are still) more fragmented than the Western European ones (Bielasiak 2002, Jasiewicz 2003, Birch 2001, Enyedi 2006a). True, there exist some countries with few parties in Eastern Europe, but in those cases either the freedom of competition is questionable or the party labels hide coalitions of separate groupings.

In many of the Eastern European countries the number of parties jumped after the second election, when the coalitions facilitating the regime change fell apart. In Hungary, under the conditions of „goulash-communism" the differences across the newly forming political organizations became clear early on, and therefore there was never a need for an umbrella organization that would include all the principal forces of the opposition. Moreover, the already concentrated party system became even less fragmented during the years (Tóth 2001, Enyedi 2006b), that is, the number of competing and parliamentary

parties declined and the number of votes concentrated on a few parties. In 1990 the two largest parties obtained less than half of the votes. For about seven-eight years the two largest parties continuously attract about eighty percent of the party preferences.

The big question of 2006 was whether the process of defragmentation continues and whether the number of parliamentary parties declines even further. A number of opinion polls predicted a two-party parliament. This would have made the Hungarian party system one of the most concentrated party systems in Europe.

At the end four party lists received more than five percent, though after the election not four but five factions were formed in the parliament *(Table 1)*. The number of factions reflects the rules of party finance and patronage so far as the establishment of a separate Christian Democratic (KDNP) faction was justified by its politicians, among other reasons, by the fact that this will provide the right with more institutional opportunities and financial resources. But since the public support of KDNP is still below one percent, and since the leaders of KDNP have the obligation to coordinate their actions with Fidesz, the functioning of the parliament is closer to a four-party than to a five-party format.

Table 1

Parliamentary seats in Hungary

	1990		1994		1998		2002		2006	
	db.	%	Db.	%	db.	%	db.	%	Db.	%
MSZP	33	8,5	209	54,1	134	34,7	178	46,1	190	49,2
Fidesz	22	5,7	20	5,2	148	38,3	164	42,5	141	36,5
KDNP	21	5,4	22	5,7	0	0,0	0	0,0	23	6,0
SZDSZ	94	24,4	70	18,1	24	6,2	20	5,2	20	5,2
MDF	164	42,5	38	9,8	17	4,4	24	6,2	11	2,8
FKGP	44	11,4	26	6,7	48	12,4				
MIÉP					14	3,6				
others	2	0,5	1	0,3					1	0,3
independents	6	1,6			1	0,3				

The number of effective parties express more precisely the level of party system concentration. After the 1990 election there were 6.7 effective parties in Hungary. This number dropped first to 5.5 (1994), then to 4.5 (1998), then to 2.8 (2002), and finally, in 2006, to 2.7. The ratio of parliamentary seats shows a less steep decline. The Hungarian parliament began with 3.7 effective parties. In 1994 this figure was 2.9, in 1998 3.4, in 2002 2.2, while in 2006 2.35 was this figure. This trend is also downwards, but if KDNP (with 23 MPs) is treated as a separate unit, 2.6 will be the indicator for the 2006-2010 parliament, and the later figure actually indicates a slight increase in fragmentation.

Although a strictly two-party system is further away than it seemed before the 2006 election, the concentration of the party system continued. The number of votes given to parties that did not make it into the parliament declined from 635 thousands (2002) to 174 thousands (2006), that is to 3.2 percent of the total vote. One party majority is also closer: MSZP would need only four more seats to reach that. The proportion of the

votes given to the two leading parties also increased (from 83 percent to 85 percent). Their parliamentary share is 86 percent, or, if Fidesz and KDNP are taken as one, 92 percent. Compare that to other countries in the region. In Albania 65, in Bulgaria 56, in the Czech Republic 77, in Estonia 55, in Latvia 50, in Lithuania 50, in Macedonia 64, in Moldova 89, in Poland 63, in Romania 74, in Serbia 54, in Slovakia 54, in Slovenia 67, in Ukraine 70 percent was the respective figure in 2006. In Europe the Maltese and the Greek parliaments are even less fragmented, but in the latter case the political space is in fact more pluralistic, containing three separate poles.

The concentration of the party system was greatly facilitated by the disproportionality of the electoral system, especially the electoral threshold (four, then five percent) and the low district magnitude. In 2006 it was rather the difficulty of setting up a regional list that filtered out weaker parties: citizens could vote for only five party-lists in all parts of the country *(Table 2)*. The Workers Party managed to have only 11, the Centrum only 8 territorial lists out of the 20 maximum. Since the number of wasted votes decreased, and the vote cast for the largest two parties increased, the parliament reflects the proportion of votes more accurately than before. The Loosemore-Hanby index indicates how many percentages of seats end up in the 'wrong hands'. The 2006 index was only 6.8, about half of the 2002 figure, and only one third of the 1994 figure. That means that today there is less need for the mechanical effects of the electoral system to reduce the number of parties.

Table 2

The impact of the electoral system on the party system

	1990	1994	1998	2002	2006
Party lists above the five percent threshold	6	6	5	3	4
Party lists present in all 20 regions	6	8	8	7	5
National party lists	12	15	12	8	10
Loosemore-Hanby index	20,18	21,15	12,28	11,7	6,8

But the psychological effects of the electoral system continue to make the life of the small parties difficult. Strategic voting (voting according to second preference and non-voting) was facilitated by the large emotional and ideological distance between the poles of the political space. The political, cultural, media and religious elites have a bipolar structure. Members of the elites systematically attack the parties that are likely to fall below five percent, claiming that these parties prepare the ground for the victory of the opposite side. The originally more fragmented public has gradually accepted the bipolar structure of the elites, and has joined the leading party of his or her chosen side. That is, the electoral system reduced the number of parties not alone, but in combination with high polarization (Enyedi 2006b).

The dominance of the prime minister over the government also helped the defragmentation of the party system. Parties that had no credible prime minister candidate lost ground (Tóka 2004). The centralized structure of the country makes very

difficult the life of parties that have positions only at local levels. It seems that parties that fell out of the parliament have a chance to come back only with the help of an insider party.

2. The structure of the party alliances

During 2006 the tensions between the two right wing parties, MDF and Fidesz, increased, but otherwise the structure of alliances staid the same. A 'two camps, two leading parties, missing middle' pattern survived and consolidated further. That means that Hungary diverges considerably from the pattern that traditionally existed in small states of Europe. That pattern was characterized by a prominent role of the middle parties, which were able to govern in changing coalitions.[1] The strategy followed by the major parties excluded the possibility for the development of such a pattern in Hungary. Since 1994 the leadership of Fidesz forcefully represents the view that two camps exist in the country and there can be no cooperation between them. Since the mid-1990s SZDSZ also gave up its ambitions to play the role of the middle party, and became a niche-party within the left. The MSZP – as opposed to the SZDSZ – does occupy the ideological center on a number of ideological dimensions, but, given its Communist past and given its large social support, it is destined to play the role of one of the poles[2]. In other words, it is not well suited for the role of a middle party. By occupying the pragmatic center field MSZP actually makes it difficult for a real middle party to emerge. The novelty during the 2006 campaign was that MDF did try to position itself in the middle. But the party lacks size and partners to fulfill this role at the moment.

The 2006 campaign again highlighted that the coalition preferences are central for the identity of Hungarian parties. To which political side a party belongs depends not on which particular ideological tenets it subscribes to, but on which other parties it accepts as coalition partner. In 1993 the beginning of the party system change was signaled by the Fidesz's decision not to exclude a coalition with MDF, and it was completed by the decision of SZDSZ to go into government with the Socialists. In 2002 the profile of Centrum was defined not by its program but by its claim that the party was equidistant from both camps. In 2006 MDF also rejected both Gyurcsány and Orbán as potential prime ministers and this position, according to many involved actors, amounted to the departure of MDF from the right wing camp. But the development of a three-pole structure is hindered by the low popularity of MDF and by the fact that the leaders of the party still conceptualize the political space as divided into two halves, left and right, placing themselves firmly on he right.

On the eve of the election night in 2006 Viktor Orbán claimed that the defeat of the right was due to the lack of cooperation on that side. Although it is questionable whether he was right on that point, cooperation is indeed a crucial issue. Political science knows little about cooperation between parties between elections, because the majority of the party systems are either multiparty systems based on proportional electoral rules, in which cooperation typically equals post-election government building, or majoritarian systems producing single party cabinets, where the need for cooperation is significantly smaller. But since parties must in all systems consider the possibility that their actions may have positive impact on the chances of other parties, there is definitely need for a more serious study of various forms of cooperation. This is especially important in those

countries where the electoral system provides room for the expression of second preferences.

The last one-and-a-half decade produced the following techniques of cooperation in Hungary:

(1) parties may provide financial support to each other,
(2) they may support each other through the mass media controlled by them,
(3) may acknowledge each others' competence in certain areas,
(4) may strengthen each others' credibility through rhetoric gestures,
(5) may restrain from nominating candidates in certain districts, or may withdraw an already nominated candidate
(6) may support the candidates of the other parties in certain districts,
(7) may integrate the candidates of other parties into their own party-list,
(8) may jointly nominate candidates
(9) may submit common lists or
(10) may encourage their supporters to vote for another party.

In Hungary the institutional framework provides plenty of opportunity for using all these techniques. The state support to parties is generous, the relation between parties and mass media are strong and citizens have two or three votes that can be shared. Cooperation is, of course, always risky: a party can loose the support of those who do not like the other party, can loose resources and can strengthen a rival. It is especially risky if party „A" tries to convince its supporters to vote for party „B" *instead* of party „A". If its call is successful, it will loose votes. If not, it will loose credibility. The long-term effects are also doubtful: voting even for tactical reasons for another party may lead to the development of new party preferences. The party identification literature tells us that more regularly one votes for a party stronger the emotional ties to the party become and more immune the voter will be towards the appeal of other parties..

In spite of all these risks, in 2006 some of the leaders of MSZP encouraged their supporters to vote for the SZDSZ. The other listed techniques of cooperation have also been used. It seems that, in spite of the decline in the number of parties, the logic of Hungarian party competition compels the parties to run the risks of cooperation. This is so because, due to the rigid coalition preferences, the stake of the competition is not the victory of the party, but the victory of the bloc. The allies are, of course, rivals, to some extent. But their good performance makes the victory of the bloc more likely. Moreover, as the establishment of a separate parliamentary faction of the KDNP has shown, MPs can even become more valuable if they sit in the faction of another party. The victory of a bloc requires a complex strategy, involving a combination of concentration of forces and of cooperation based on the toleration of dissent. Until there is no party that could govern alone (which possibility is not far), those parties will be in an advantaged position that can play well this complex game.

3. The ideological space

The ideology of the parties changed little between 2002 and 2006, but the changes in emphases had serious consequences. The statist, anti-liberal and (mildly) nationalist currents virtually completely disappeared from the official site of the MSZP. The

reorganized KDNP defines itself, as it did earlier, as a Weltanschauung party. It is more in line with the behavioral norms of European Christian Democracy than before but, exploiting the fact that it is a small party without governmental responsibilities, it criticizes more directly than Fidesz does the liberal European mainstream – both in cultural and economic areas. In the previous regard it is to the right, in the latter to the left of its Western sister-parties. SZDSZ emphasizes more than before its right wing economic program. This is the direction where MDF is also heading, while it also toned down its previous authoritarian rhetoric. Fidesz has continued its critical attitude towards globalization but deemphasized its cultural nationalism and focused on economic protectionism, and on the role of the state in setting wages and prices. Fidesz politicians started to question the relevance of categories like left and right, and even attacked MSZP of being an extreme-neoliberal party, while some of the MSZP leaders accused Fidesz of being communist in its economic program

These changes do not threaten the fundamental structure of the ideological space. Since 1994 anticommunism and liberalism are not combinable. Two ideological packages exist only: the nationalist, conservative, anticommunist, Christian (clerical) and traditionalist right and the culturally liberal, anticlerical, cosmopolitan and anti-anticommunist left While individual citizens have their own idiosyncratic ways of combining ideological positions, the political space became, parallel to the decrease in the number of parties and somewhat even preceding that, one-dimensional (Tóka 2005b). In Benoit and Laver (2006: 166) expert study, Hungary come closest to one dimensionality out of the 18 post-communist countries. In spite of the efforts of SZDSZ, the political significance of the liberal identity is dwarfed by left-right polarization, which is partly so because of the insignificance of conservative identification (Angelusz and Tardos 2005).

While there was little change in the fundamental ideological divide, a number of symbolic issues were deemphasized during the 2006 campaign. The issue of nationalism has lost relevance after the 2004 referendum on the extension of citizenship rights to citizens of Hungarian origin living in the neighboring states. Note, however, that the right continues to identify itself as the 'national' bloc (next to using the „polgár" label, that means 'civic' or 'bourgeois'). Religious topics were also pushed somewhat into the background, although the return of KDNP into parliamentary politics and the revitalization of the anticlericalism of SZDSZ prepared the ground for their renewed importance. Anti-communism has also become less of an issue before the election, but at the anniversary of the 1956 revolution in October it itably regained its previous prominence.

As far as the identity of the political camps is concerned,economic issues continue to play a secondary role, though recently MDF partly justified its conflicts with Fidesz pointing out the differences in the economic program of the two parties (the program of MDF being more right wing than that of Fidesz). Note that if economic issues were to become indeed the issues that determine party alliances then MDF and MSZP would occupy the median position, and the likelihood of coalitions ruled by middle parties would increase. That would amount to a genuine party system change.

While economic issues are largely irrelevant for the identity of the parties, they play a central role in the campaigns. Therefore the parties are carefully adjusting their positions to public opinion. This flexibility hinders the crystallization of party positions,

but before the 2006 election the profiles of the left and right did become clearer: the economic profile of the left is, ironically, right wing, while the profile of the right is left-wing. This summary involves, of course, some degree of exaggeration and distortion: the economic program of Fidesz is entrepreneur-friendly and contains a number of measures intended to help the Hungarian middle class. The welfare policies of MSZP lay a greater emphasis on the support of the poorest strata. In these regards the two parties do fit the stereotypes of their respective party families. But the emphasis on the role of the state in economy is typical of the right (already since 1995, but especially since 2002). It is not so much the specific proposals of Fidesz (like halt to privatization, state regulation over prizes, etc.) that distinguish the party from the bulk of the European right, but the shift in the party's rhetoric towards a critique of capitalism and globalization. In case of the MSZP ideological idiosyncrasy is less spectacular, is so far as a number of Western European left-wing parties have also embraced liberal economic reforms. But the position of MSZP is still different than the one of the British Labour, for example, in the sense that Labour is still somewhat more state and redistribution-centered than its chief rival.

4. Organizational developments

The total membership of the four parliamentary parties seems to be more or less stable: MDF and MSZP have recently lost, SZDSZ and Fidesz have gained members *(Figure 1)*. SZDSZ and Fidesz also managed to increase its non-state-related income, and only in case of MDF one can note the opposite tendency. In 2005 Fidesz received more than hundred million Forints as membership fees, which is still a very small portion of the overall income, but it is more than what any party managed to collect in the past (Enyedi 2006c).

Figure 1.

*Membership of the four parliamentary parties*
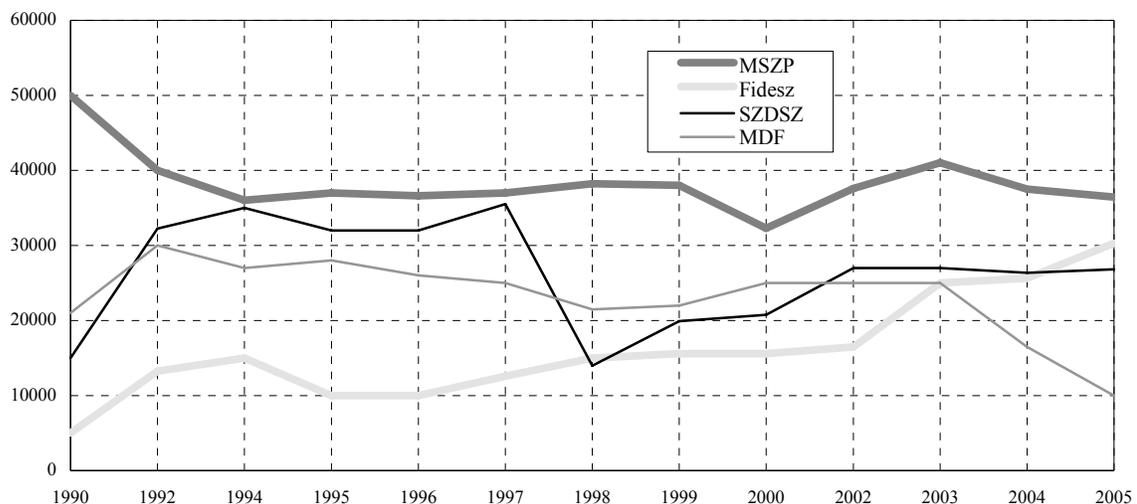
Source: For 1990 and 1994 Körösényi (1998: 90), for 1994 van Biezen (2001:111), for the rest Hungary's Political Yearbooks.

The traditional party elites are well entrenched in their power positions, though a few political entrepreneurs were also successful. In this regard I prefer to distinguish three types of carriers (Figure 2). Those leaders who have a „charismatic" carrier typically established themselves the party in question and determine its program single-handedly. „Party" carrier means that the person became a leader because of her performance as party activist or representative. Finally, those who have „external" carrier were coopted by the party due to the resources (money, fame, influence, organizational skills, rhetorical skills, etc) they brought from outside of the party system. In the last type there is typically only a short time past between membership in the party and membership in the party's leadership. An extreme case was represented in 2002 by Péter Medgyessy, who became the *de facto* leader of MSZP without ever joining the party. His example calls attention to the fact that formal membership does not mark always well the actual boundaries of a party. In case of MSZP one could argue that the ex-MSZMP (Communist party) and KISZ (Communist Youth Organization) apparatchiks should be counted as insiders, whether they joined or not MSZP.

Autonomous parties are characterized by leaders who followed a „party" carrier. But more a party depends on the electoral competition, more it is forced to borrow leaders from outside.

Figure 2

Carriers of Hungarian party leaders
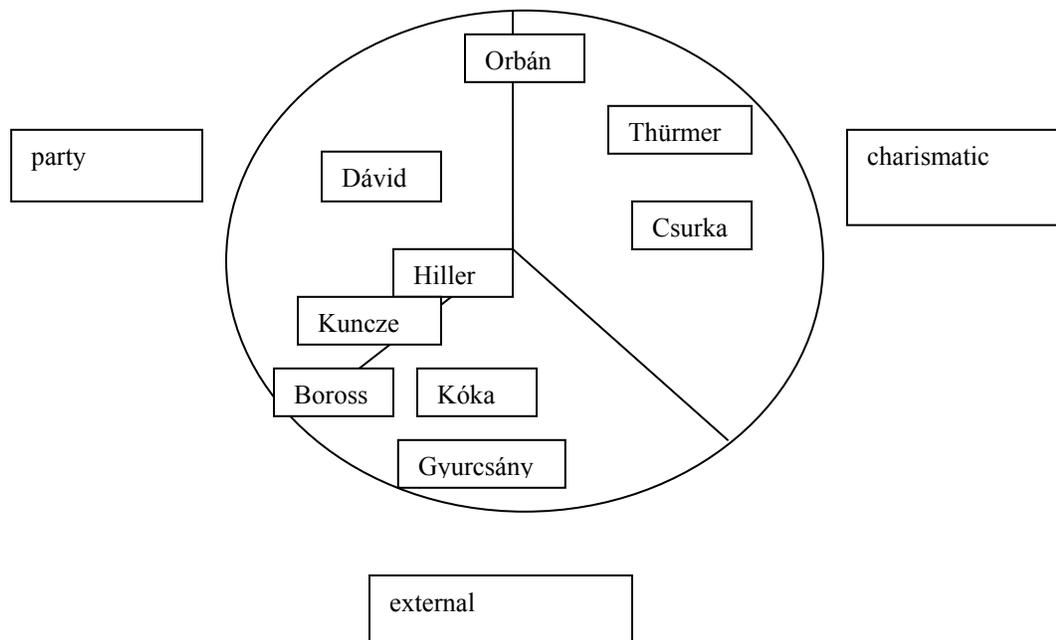
Most of the present day party leaders have a long past in politics. Kóka and Gyurcsány are „externals", but they also became integrated into the party hierarchy. True,

this integration happened first into the party in public office and only later into the party in central office, somewhat similarly to some earlier cases (Péter Boross and, to some extent, Gábor Kuncze). Gyurcsány's rise showed that for those who do not belong to the 1990 elite the participation in government is particularly important avenue. But it also shows that even they are typically expected to obtain party office.

The success of Gyurcsány, who has a short past in the party but commands significant financial and social resources may point at the declining autonomy of parties. But he rose to his present position by conquering the local party organizations and the delegates to the party congress, by occupying the leadership position in Győr-Sopron county and by using the slogan „the party has government and not vice versa". In this sense he also legitimized the recruitment function of party organs and the partisanship of government.

While Gyurcsány was elected as the MSZP's prime minister candidate through an open competition (in which he challenged the incumbent party leadership), the centralization and oligarchization of the Hungarian parties continued during the last years unabated. Fidesz (as the Workers' Party, MIÉP and MDF) is firmly controlled by one single man, although after the lost elections there were calls in the party for some democratization.[3]

5. The partisanship of the society

The Hungarian society did not become during the last years 'partisan' if one means by that that the average citizen would have found a safe home in one of the parties and would turn with respect towards party politics. The trust in parties continues to be low, and the moderate increase in trust witnessed before 2002 did not continue in the 2002-2006 parliament *(Figure 3)*. The high participation rate of the 2002 election was not repeated in 2006. At the same time the number of those who are ready to identify with a party is high (Tóka 2005a: 32, Karácsony 2006)

Figure 3
Trust in parties as opposed to trust in political institutions in general, 100 degree scale)
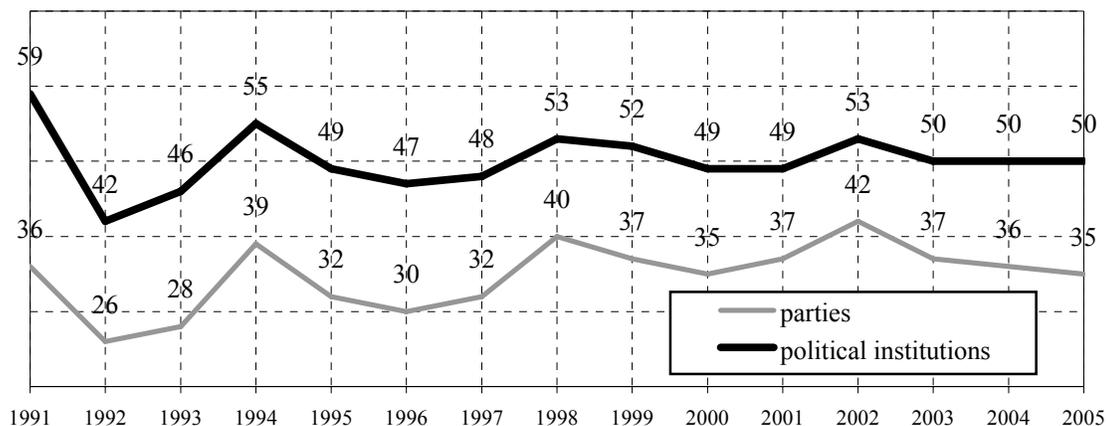
Source: Bakonyi-Hann-Karácsony (2006)

The concentration of the party system lowered the likelihood that the parties could function as representatives of well definable social groups, although as far as the general social embeddedness of parties is concerned there are diverging views (for the weakness of embeddedness see Tóka 2005a, for its strength see Angelusz and Tardos 2005, Enyedi 2004). The personal relationships among citizens are more closed according to party preferences than according to denomination, education, age or gender (Angelusz and Tardos 2005), indicating that party politics is already present in the private life of the voters.

During the 2006 campaign the parties paid more attention to mobilization than ever before. The two largest parties based their campaign on detailed files containing information on the voters and relied on tens of thousands of activists.[4] According to a Gallup poll (7 April 2006) 20 percent of voters and 34 percent of Fidesz voters have been personally visited by Fidesz activists.[5] This intensive door-to-door mobilization was justified by the shrinkage of the conquerable segments of voters and was also supported by the widely shared belief that the 2002 victory of MSZP was due to its superior mobilizational achievements and that the expected lower turnout would increase the importance of mobilization even further. The victory of the Republicans in the US strengthened the conviction that traditional, door-to-door campaigning has a role even in the age of media democracy. The appearance of American advisors guaranteed that this knowledge is transferred into the Hungarian campaign.

In Hungary, as opposed to most of Western Europe, the political mobilization of the society happens mainly from the right. That remained true for the 2002-2006 term as well. It is difficult to assess exactly how many, hitherto passive citizens were involved in Fidesz's numerous petitions, rallies, town hall meeting, etc., but even if only a few tens of thousands, these actions undoubtedly contributed to the level of participation and politicization. It is more doubtful, however, whether one can speak of improvement as far as the quality of participation is concerned. It is especially so if one contrasts Hungarian developments with the idealized image of spontaneous, bottom-up movements. In reality, of course, political and social elites are almost always involved in organizing social movements. And the Civic Circles, the most important movement set up by the Fidesz leadership, are not even far from the idealized picture in the sense that they sprang to life after very little preparation, and they operate in opposition, against, and not with the help of, the authorities. Fidesz leaders were right in stating, even if they exaggerated the figures, that they have managed to built one of the largest political communities in the region.[6] At the same time the very fact that these new organizations depend very much on one single political leader limits their positive impact on civic culture.

The riots that followed with a few months the 2006 parliamentary election were not organized by parties, and in this sense they can be conceived as challenging the dominance of parties in society. But the extreme polarization of the party system was definitely one of their principal reasons of these 'unfortunate events', and the street actions failed to produce relevant new political actors. The public opinion concerning the riots and the reaction of the police were well predictable by party preferences.

6. The weight of parties in governing

One can establish the relevance for parties by checking the influence of other political actors and institutions. Although one candidate representing a civic organization has managed to become elected in 2006, but otherwise elections are only for parties. In 1990 198 independent candidates, in 1994 103, in 1998 53, in 2002 40, in 2006 only 12 ran. The partisan nature of mass media became perhaps even stronger. A growing part of the population has contact with institutions that have a political bias (Angelusz and Tardos 2005). The Constitutional Court is not as active in politically sensitive issues as it used to be. Only the election of an independent for president and the appearance of a few businessmen in the political scene have questioned the monopoly of parties over public life.

In the past party leaders were often able to overshadow the parties themselves, and in 2006 this phenomenon again threatened the pure party-based logics of politics. The battle of the two leaders (Gyurcsány and Orbán) attracted probably more attention than anything else. This phenomenon fits in the general process of prezidentialization of Hungarian politics (Körösényi 2006). At the same time the not-so-voluntary resignation of PM Medgyessy in 2004 has demonstrated the limits of the prime minister's powers. It showed that prezidentialisation does not lead to the loss of the autonomy of the governmental parties. Exactly because the prime minister is so central for the campaign parties cannot afford to keep a weakened Prime Minister in office.

7. The logic and intensity of party competition

Competitiveness is a complex concept, and its different components may point in different directions. This is well exemplified by the Hungarian case. On the one hand, the intensity of party competition has declined in the sense that the number of available voters has diminished. Net electoral volatility was 28.3 in 1994, 33.6 in 1998, 20.2 in 2002, and 8.6 in 2006. Party competition is characterized by less uncertainty: few parties compete in familiar combinations for the votes of a decreasing number of citizens. As opposed to recent trends in Western Europe, in Hungary incumbency is less and less penalized at the elections. In other respects, however, competition is more intense than ever. The decision of the few percentages of wavering voters leads to radically different policies and governing elite. Therefore the importance of elections has increased. The intensive competition has forced parties to work out innovative strategies and to follow attentively the changes in public opinion.

In Europe, in spite of the appearance of a number of new parties, party competition has shifted towards bipolarity. We see more and more elections where two governmental alternatives clash and the government parties stay or leave together. Repeated to this phenomenon (partly triggering it), the voters are inclined to evaluate parties according to their performance in government, or their promises, and they do not vote according to collective identities. The Hungarian developments point in a similar direction: valence competition overshadows the direct confrontations over values (Török 2006, Tóka Gábor 2005a,b). This could lead to higher level of competitiveness since those voters who focus on performance more easily change party than those who vote according to identity or value.

The central role of valence issues is related to the fact that fragmentation declined and the two party-system seems to be within reach. In two party systems parties are

typically catch-all parties that try to stay away from issues that may divide their voters. Yet, Fidesz has repeatedly failed to follow up this pattern. The radical gestures of its leadership have cost many percentage points to the party in 2006. It seems that the emotional and ideological orientation of the Hungarian elite is at odds with the requirements of a performance-oriented, pragmatic competition typical of two party systems.

8. Conclusions

Hungarian politics is in turmoil, but the Hungarian party system is consolidated. Even more spectacular than the decrease in the number of parties is the fact that no new party appeared on the parliamentary scene for eight years. Five of the six parties represented seventeen years ago in the parliament still have parliamentary faction. In 2006 no party established after 1993 received more than one percent. If one disregards the breakup of MDF and Fidesz, the party alliances are also stable. While the historical perspective is still missing, these developments provide evidences for the claim that the Hungarian party system is frozen, at least as far as party labels are concerned.

The fundamental function of parties is to translate the will of the people into governmental policies. Many aspects of Hungarian party politics: the competitiveness of the system, the clear governmental alternatives, the one-dimensional ideological space, the stable governments, the strong party discipline in the parliament, the autonomous nature of the parties, and the presence of party politics in various spheres of social life are all potentially beneficial in this regard. These features also improve accountability. Loyalty to the bloc guarantees that the vote of the people, and not post-election negotiations between parties decide the composition of the government. True, as the party system shrank, the possibility to represent ideological packages that characterize specific social groups became smaller. At the same time the fact that the citizens, willingly or not, accepted the leadership of the large parties, radically decreased the number of wasted votes.

The battle between left and right, and between Fidesz and MSZP is a balanced one. But in fact in the 1994-2006 period the Socialists tended to be the more popular party. Using the American terminology, MSZP was the sun, and Fidesz the moon of the Hungarian party system in the last decade. But the former used to be the more passive, more pragmatic actor, while Fidesz was constantly ready to redefine the logic of the game wit its aggressive, innovative strategy. From the point of view of executive power the Hungarian party system consists of three actors, Fidesz, MSZP and SZDSZ. SZDSZ is also relevant, they were for example behind of the dismissal of Medgyessy. But from the point of view of electoral alternatives it is not SZDSZ but MDF that could become the third force, because its coalition-preferences seem to be more flexible than those of the SZDSZ. KDNP has no structural relevance whatsoever, but it reappearance highlights two important features of the Hungarian party system. The first is that brand-names matter. KDNP had no money, no social support, no popular politicians. But it had a name. The second is the role of the Catholic church. The church accepted and supported Fidesz, but when the possibility appeared for recreating a truly Christian-Catholic faction, the church did not hesitate to grasp it.

The simplification and stabilization of the party system happened rapidly. But the sources that led to stability may turn disruptive in the long run. The evaluation of Orbán, for example, divides the public sharply and therefore serves at the moment as an anchor of political identities. But campaigns that focus on personality (just like the one in 2006) can be, for obvious reasons, potentially destabilizing for the party system. The somewhat idiosyncratic ideological patterns that characterize Hungarian parties[7] may also cause problems in the future if the European political structures penetrate more deeply the national arenas.

Still, what one must emphasize at the moment is stability. The parties are already getting older than some of their voters. A large part of the party elites are also around for two decades by now. Many of the party system characteristics: low fragmentation, high emotional and ideological polarization, the opposition of leftist and right-wing coalitions, the secondary role of economic issues, etc. are also with us for more than a decade by now. The youngest voters cannot remember a different style of politics. Therefore one rightly emphasizes the institutionalization (Enyedi 1998, Enyedi and Tóka 2006), or the freezing of the party system.

But stability is not something that is given: it must be re-confirmed every day by the decisions of the party leaders. Next to the barriers erected in front of small and new parties, the constant organizational and ideological rejuvenation of the old parties was needed for their survival. As opposed to the situation in much of Eastern Europe (with the exception of the Czech Republic and Slovenia), in Hungary 'Her Majesty's Opposition' was always better able to voice the discontent of the people than organizations outside of the established parties. This was so largely because of the very sharp government-opposition divide and because of the rigidity of coalition preferences. These conditions had a negative impact on the performance of governments but solidified the logic of party competition. The polarized, confrontation-oriented party competition and the huge difference in influence between being in government or opposition pushed the parties to focus single-mindedly on victory, even at the expense of economic rationality. The irresponsible governing and the increasingly populist style of campaigning produced a stormy political and economic environment, but within this environment the parties could form the point of gravity.

The four parliamentary parties retained their voters with the help of symbolic gestures and again and again managed to gain the sympathy of the losers of the time with the help of demagogic promises. The popular and populist proposals contributed to the maintenance of the status quo, but they led to a deep financial crisis in 2006. The combination of the financial crisis with the civil-war like mentality of the competing blocs pushed Hungary in a deep political crisis. This is probably not what the parties wanted but this doesn't mean that they will necessarily loose out of it.

In most of Eastern Europe the lack of stability of the party system causes difficulties for accountability () and even for the functioning of the state (Lewis 2006). In Hungary, one may argue, it is the opposite: the rigidity of the party system, the institutionalization of high polarization that leads to serious social problems. New actors, not socialized in this particular style of competition have no chance to penertare the party system. The party system functions perfectly. But it is uncertain whether the society will survive it.

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[1] By middle party I mean a party that has both leftist and rightist coalition potential. Centrum parties are those that occupy the middle of the ideological scales.

[2] This is confirmed by the fact that MSZP, in spite of its pragmatism, is regularly placed to a more extremist position on the left-right scale than SZDSZ, which is in fact more radical on most economic and cultural issues.

[3] See *Heti Válasz,* May 18, 2006, vol. 6, no. 20.

[4] Pál Schmitt, the vice-president talked of 400-450 thousands activists in his press conference, 10 March 2006.

[5] http://www.gallup.hu/Gallup/release/jolk45huie4.htm

[6] As the Fidesz leader László Kövér put is: „Today there is only one political community: the community of the civic bloc, with its 2 million voters and hundred thousand activists. *Heti Válasz*, May 4, 2006, vol. 6., no 18.