Introduction: Surviving Democracy

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past.[1]

We cannot continue as we have. A radical transformation of the party is not a tactical concession, but a question of political survival.[2]

This book addresses a fundamental question in the study of democratic politics and institutional change: How can the discredited political actors of an *ancien regime* not only survive the collapse of the old order, but succeed in the new one? Among the most spectacular cases of such persistence and adaptation are the survival and regeneration of the communist successor parties in East Central Europe, the focus of this book.

As communist regimes collapsed across East Central Europe in 1989, the defeat of the communist parties seemed complete. After all, these were the same regimes that had shown no regard for basic civic rights, had "strategically planned" the economies into negative growth rates, and had displayed a remarkable propensity for corruption and self-enrichment. Over forty years of oppression had left the people with memories that were as bitter as they were vivid, and the popular uprisings of 1989 fought to remove the parties from power. The first demand voiced by the masses of demonstrators in the streets, and by their representatives negotiating with party officials, was that the communist stranglehold on the economy and

[1] Marx, Karl. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. New York: International Publishers, 1963, p. 15.

[2] Jacek Zdrojewski, member of the Polish Warsaw Region Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party. *Trybuna Ludu*, 16 January 1989.

the polity finally end. The democratic breakthroughs of 1989 thus bade farewell to regimes widely despised by their own citizens.

Few predicted that the successors to these parties would survive in the democratic political system, much less thrive. As the new regimes took over, the communist parties were forced to exit from power and governance. They were no longer allowed to organize in the workplace (their mainstay), their assets were expropriated, and they were forced to relinquish their auxiliary organizations. It seemed simply a matter of time before these parties would be swept away into the "dustbin of history."

Yet all communist parties "survived democracy" and the regime transition that began in 1988–9, and all remained politically active afterwards. Several of the successor parties have even won free elections, returning to govern. These parties regenerated – they have gained long-term access to governmental power, by transforming their appeals, garnering broad support, and enforcing discipline and professionalism in their parliamentary behavior.

For the parties examined in this book, the outcomes varied from attempts to retain as much communist ideology and organization as possible to dramatic metamorphoses into broadly accepted, moderate, democratic competitors. Thus, the Czech successor party, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (Komunistická Strana Čech a Moravy, KSČM), pursued a strategy of continuity: It retained many of its organizational structures, much of its communist name and ideology, and many of its symbols. As a result, its electorate was relatively narrow and disgruntled, and the party continued to be excluded a priori from electoral or governmental coalitions. Rather than transforming itself to pursue voters and anticipate competition, the party relied chiefly on the protest vote, and expected its support to expand as a result of worsening economic and political conditions.

The Slovak Party of the Democratic Left (Strana Demokratickej Ľavici, SDĽ) followed a different path after 1989. The SDĽ denounced communist ideology and appeals, and became widely accepted as committed to upholding democracy in Slovakia. It gained almost 15% of the vote in 1992 and in 1998. The party had a relatively easy time joining coalitions, and was courted by both the government and opposition parties throughout the post-1989 era. On the other hand, its support remained highly unstable, and the party was accused of "fishtailing," of political inconsistency and programmatic ambiguity, as the party pursued shifting constituencies, often with radically different appeals.

The more spectacular transformations lie to the north and to the south of the former Czechoslovakia. The Polish successor party, the Social Democracy of Poland (Socjaldemokracja Rzeczpospolitej Polskiej, SdRP), became the electoral darling of East Central Europe. Its turnaround was stunning – the party lost every seat it could in the semifree elections in 1989, but then went on to win elections only four years later, with 20% of the vote in 1993. Nor was the party's popularity hurt by its stay in office – in the next elections, in 1997, the SdRP actually *gained* voters, unlike any other incumbent in the region. In 2001, the party again won the elections, this time with an astounding 41% of the vote. However, in parliament, the SdRP suffered continued exclusion by parliamentary parties with roots in the former anticommunist opposition. In 1993, it could form a coalition only with the heir to a pre-1989 communist satellite organization, the Peasants' Party (PSL).

The Hungarian Socialist Party (Magyar Szocialista Párt, MSzP) enjoyed the greatest public success, especially in its parliamentary performance. The party's managerial competence and administrative effectiveness appealed to broad, cross-cutting constituencies, and the party won the April 1994 elections with 33% of the vote. Unlike its Polish counterpart, the MSzP could form a coalition with a party that arose from the pre-1989 anticommunist opposition (the Alliance of Free Democrats – Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége, SzDSz). After four years of coalition rule, it continued to be seen as committed to democracy and effective in governance, even if it lost the 1998 election with 32.3% of the vote.

This surprising survival and resurgence astonished and dismayed many observers. It was as if the Duvaliers in Haiti, or Franco's protégés in Spain, were voted back into power within five years of the collapse of their regimes on the promise that they would promote competitive democracy and an efficient market economy. Given the popular hatred of the communist regimes, how could their successors possibly return to power?

In both popular and scholarly circles, the favored explanations emphasized the enormous stress of the transition to capitalism begun in 1989. Despite the initial euphoria surrounding the promise of efficiency and prosperity, this transition quickly proved as burdensome and brutal as it had in Western Europe centuries earlier. It generated an entire class of the "losers of the transition" – those unable to exploit the new system, whose hopes for economic improvement quickly soured. As their circumstances worsened, scholars reasoned, these voters would naturally turn away from political parties representing the new order, and instead return to parties

representing the relative stability and security of the old regime. In short, the parties' success was simply a popular reaction to the privations of the transition to capitalism.

Yet, as this book argues, a closer examination of the parties' appeals and the electoral data shows that the parties have achieved their greatest successes where they could appeal to numerous, wide-ranging constituencies. Their electorates ranged from elderly pensioners to the intellectuals to successful, brash young entrepreneurs, and hence did not consist simply (or even mostly) of the "losers of the transition." Moreover, all the successor parties remained committed to democracy – and few questioned the necessity of market reforms. Instead, in their programs, electoral campaigns, and parliamentary performances, they argued how best to implement these reforms. The electoral winners were those who convinced the voters that they could best administer the new economic and political system – the very "bourgeois capitalist democracy" their communist predecessors had railed against for over four decades. The regeneration of the communist successor parties is thus not the retrograde reaction that many had supposed.

How, then, did the parties regenerate? This book argues that the parties' regeneration depends less on the vicissitudes of the transition and its economic consequences, or even on the democratic party competition faced by the communist successors, than it does on the parties' own actions. The overwhelming pressures of the democratic transition that began in 1989 provided both an impetus and an opportunity to change within the parties. The regime collapse opened up the political opportunity structure – formal structures of the political system opened up, elite alignments became unstable, and popular cleavages were made manifest (Tarrow 1994, McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996). The parties could take advantage of these openings – remaking their appeals, behavior, and personnel.

The parties' very capacity to transform themselves is puzzling, however – how could authoritarian parties spawn successful democratic competitors? After all, communist parties have long been portrayed as moribund, stagnant backwaters where Kafkaesque party apparatchiks endlessly shuffled paper and paid obeisance to ideological orthodoxies. Their popular nicknames were telling; for example, party hacks in Poland were known as "concrete." Bureaucrats, not politicians, ran these parties, as the long tradition of communist studies suggests. It would seem highly implausible that such organizations and actors could give rise to effective campaign

machines, successful democratic appeals, and professional politicians – in short, responsive and responsible political representatives.

Fundamentally, the answer lies in reexamining the structures and practices of the individual communist parties. Some did resemble the stereotypical fossilized bureaucracy with little interest in genuine representation or engagement. Their elite selection favored ideological loyalty over practical skills, and these elites neither reformed policy nor engaged society. Such parties were unable subsequently to transform themselves into broadly supported democratic competitors. Instead, they were more likely to retain their communist-era appeals and constituencies. Others, however, were far more flexible in their goals and practices, geared toward advancing pragmatic elites, willing to negotiate with the societies they ostensibly governed and to implement economic and political liberalization. These parties could more readily and credibly change their appeals and orientation.

These predemocratic organizational practices fostered a powerful set of elite political resources with which the new party leaders in 1989 could envision and implement strategies of political metamorphosis. These resources consisted both of the elites' "portable skills" (the expertise and administrative experiences gained in the previous regime) and their "usable pasts" (the historical record of party accomplishments to which the elites can point, and the public perceptions of this record – the repertoire of shared political references). Many of these political resources could arise only in the communist parties, since the anticommunist opposition could formulate policy alternatives, but not implement them.[3]

These political resources did not emerge during the transition, or in the months preceding it, but in decades-long practices of the communist parties. Policies of recruitment and advancement within the communist parties could select relatively pragmatic elite cohorts. Predemocratic policy reforms, however half-hearted, both emphasized the importance of cohesive leadership and required overcoming internal barriers and building coalitions. Engaging the anticommunist societal opposition forced the future successor elites to negotiate and to compete for the public's favor, emphasizing the need for popular, responsive appeals and effective persuasion of the public. These policies gave rise to a cohort of skilled and experienced politicians, with little attachment to communist

[3] Modzelewski, Karol. "Where Did Solidarity Go?" *Uncaptive Minds*, Winter–Spring 1994, 63–72.

ideology or its goals, but with the ability to reinvent the communist parties when the regime collapsed. Ironically, therefore, containing democracy in the communist era required many of the same skills and policies that would later make the parties such effective democratic competitors. The resulting configurations of elites and historical records prior to 1989 ranged from the ossified ideologues of the stagnating Czech party to the pragmatic technocratic experts of its relatively liberal Hungarian counterpart.

Even parties blessed with skilled new elites and a record of reform, however, faced the enormous task of becoming effective democratic competitors after 1989. Having been discredited and forced to exit from power, these parties now had to convince both the voters and other parties of their democratic intentions and capabilities. If they were to gain broad electoral support and a chance to enter government coalitions, they had to formulate responsive political programs, field attractive new candidates and campaigns, and maintain parliamentary effectiveness.

To that end, the elites had to first transform the party organizations, streamlining and vertically integrating the party structures, and symbolically breaking with the past. The break with the past signaled change, while organizational centralization then allowed the parties to be flexible, united, and disciplined. These strategies allowed the parties to adapt successfully to the postcommunist political contexts.

First, the general consensus on the need for economic and political reform in the countries under consideration called for responsive and flexible appeals that would both exploit the competitors' weaknesses and maintain commitment to the new democratic system. Centralization allowed the party elites to respond more readily to voter preferences. It minimized the trade-off between appealing to party members and to the broader electorate, so that the parties could broaden their voter base without sacrificing existing support. Elite skills also made it possible to create new grounds for competition that allowed the parties to compete successfully with the new democratic parties without questioning democracy or the free market itself. Otherwise, the parties would rely on narrow or "nonstandard" appeals, such as nostalgia for the old system. These pleased old party members, but did little to attract new voters. Moreover, as we will see in Chapters 2 and 4, responsive (if vague) and flexible appeals allowed the parties to pursue postcommunist voters more readily than the strategies of voter integration that earlier had served parties so well in Western

Europe, such as grass-roots mobilization, extensive structures, and auxiliary interest organizations.

Second, centralization allowed the elites to respond to the robust competition and to the fluid postcommunist electorates. Centralized parties could more readily orchestrate electoral campaigns that effectively disseminated the party's message, and hand-pick party candidates, by enforcing cohesion and privileging top leaders in decision making within the party. Those elites with earlier political experience of negotiating and bargaining with the opposition could then run effective campaigns that responded to the electorate's needs. Professional, moderate candidates, meanwhile, increased the party's appeal, and reinforced the message that the new successor had little in common with the stereotypical communist party hacks in bad suits.

Third, the successor parties faced considerable parliamentary isolation. Centralization promoted party discipline in parliament – and such unity and cohesion made for formidable parliamentary players. Even where the division between the successor parties and those from the pre-1989 anti-communist opposition persisted, parliamentary cohesion gave credence to claims of transformation and professionalism. As we will see, the more skilled and experienced the elites, the more likely they were to pursue these transformative strategies successfully.

Why would the electorate, or other parties, trust these efforts? In developed democracies, party reputations serve as a shortcut for both voters and potential parliamentary partners, establishing both the credibility of party claims and their attractiveness as coalition partners. Yet the communist successors did not have an established democratic record, and so had to rebuild their reputations. In the meantime, their communist past largely determined the parties' image and their credibility.

As a result, the communist successor parties were both handicapped and helped by their past; on the one hand, they were discredited as monopoly rulers, and faced a skeptical audience in any attempts to redeem themselves. This aspect of their past could confound coalition efforts and preclude wider acceptance by voters and other parties. On the other hand, the parties' usable past as reformers, negotiators, and policy innovators could reinforce their claims of democratic commitment and competence, allowing the communist successors to redeem their past authoritarian efforts into democratic credibility. As the parties developed their public behavior and declarations after 1989, their democratic record would

eventually supplant the parties' usable communist past as a source of their reputation, and hence of their credibility. Consistency in parliamentary discipline and in attractive new electoral campaigns and candidates could further reinforce the parties' hard-earned new image.

Given the importance of organizational transformation and (re)building reputations, party elites had to implement their strategies early, quickly, and in a specific sequence that favored organizational streamlining and vertical integration prior to the transformation of programs, electoral methods, or parliamentary strategies. With enough time, sheer familiarity with the new face of the party could foster public acceptance. But to gain political effectiveness readily, parties needed to implement organizational centralization swiftly and decisively.

The chaotic nature of 1989 meant that there was little internal resistance to party transformation at that time. However, once the new democratic system began to consolidate, and the internal party tumult died down, barriers to further transformation could reemerge and begin to subvert party transformation from within. Since these barriers primarily took the form of vested interests within the party, such as orthodox regional leaders or the party bureaucracy, effective organizational transformations occurred *before* the parties attempted to change their appeals or their parliamentary strategies.

Therefore, while enormous differences could arise between the communist parties of 1989 and of 1991, efforts after this period had far less impact. Party programs and organizations continued to evolve, but there was no possibility of a dramatic turnaround of the sort that was feasible in 1989–91. Efforts by reformists-come-lately, such as the struggle that took place in the Czech party during 1993, had far less chance of success. Even if rapid party change could not guarantee its own credibility, slow or delayed transformation would be taken less seriously by both the electorate and other parties. In short, gradualism meant failure.

Paradoxically, then, despite the fact that the communist successor parties were the most despised political actors in 1989 to early 1990, and the unequivocal antagonists of the struggle for democracy, they had the greatest opportunity during this time to remake themselves and eventually gain the votes of the very people who had been calling for their exit from the political arena. This period of change and flux in the parties was also the time during which the political inheritances of the communist era exerted their greatest influence. Given the uncertainty regarding strategies and future outcomes, the tactics and values suggested by the com-

munist era became the templates for future action. Once organizational change and reputations began to consolidate, the policies of the key reform era of 1989–90 began to exert their own influence.

Model Summary

The elite-driven explanation offered in this book focuses on the leaders' decisions to transform the party, and the political resources with which these leaders implemented the decisions. The logic of the model can be encapsulated as follows:

Communist Practice → Elite Resources → Transformation Strategies → Regeneration

• Recruitment	• Portable Skills	• Centralization	• Responsive Appeals
• Negotiation	• Usable Past	• Break with Party Past	• Electoral Support
• Policy Reform		• Rapid Implementation	• Coalition Potential

If this explanation is correct, the following general propositions should hold:

1. For parties that have been discredited and forced out of power, organizational transformation and a break with the past are the prerequisites for pursuing further party regeneration. Parties that do not manage to break with the past and to centralize early on have greater difficulty in consolidating elite power or pursuing strategies of regeneration – transforming their public appeals, conducting effective electoral campaigns, and maintaining parliamentary discipline. Without these, disgraced and disempowered parties are unlikely to regain power.
2. These transformations must occur early, rapidly, and decisively. Discredited political parties and organizations otherwise face increasing difficulties in their attempts to regenerate. The parties also must first transform their organization before transforming party appeals, electoral strategies, or parliamentary behavior.
3. Elite resources determine the degree of transformation and its credibility. Specifically, a usable past promotes cooperation in parliament and popular credibility for the new programs and appeals. Conversely, a deep *regime divide* (the history of conflict between society and the party) would preclude such parliamentary cooperation or public acceptance. For their part, elite skills allow the parties

to centralize and to respond to electoral concerns via programs and campaigns.

4. If the sources of these elite resources lie in previous authoritarian practices, these skills and usable pasts should reflect the variation in the organizational practices of the *ancien regime*. In the case of the communist successor parties, predemocratic organizational practices – internal policies of recruitment and advancement, policy reform, and negotiation with the opposition – influenced the elites' degree of pragmatic orientation, their ability and will to centralize the parties, and their skill in responding to and communicating effectively with the public, respectively.

As a corollary, these legacies will influence party strategies so long as they provide information or a template for action that is less costly to obtain than other alternatives, such as seeking international models or other historical templates. As the political situation stabilizes, and uncertainty regarding actions and outcomes decreases, other sources of elite decision making could eventually influence party strategies.

The Broader Setting

In explaining how these transformations took place and why the parties embarked on such distinct trajectories, this book contributes to three fields of scholarship in comparative politics: organizational transformation, the consolidation of new democracies, and political party development.

First, for all the attention paid to political organizations and institutions, both recent organizational theory in sociology and historical institutionalist analyses in political science have emphasized resistance to change. Transformation is said to occur either at the margins (North 1990) or in dramatic "critical junctures" (Collier and Collier 1991), while population ecology models argued that the environment will simply reward certain forms of organization and winnow out others (Aldrich 1979, Scott 1992). There are few examinations of how established organizations survive and adapt successfully to environmental changes that often undermine the very grounds for their existence.

Yet this sort of adaptation is especially crucial, and difficult, in revolutionary situations where the *ancien regime* is disgraced and its institutions face enormous obstacles to survival. Thus, after the revolutions of 1989, the communist parties appeared completely discredited, prompting schol-