



Partecipazione e Conflitto
* *The Open Journal of Sociopolitical Studies*
<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>
ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)
ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)
PACO, Issue 9(1) 2016: 152-180
DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v9i1p152

Published in March 15, 2016

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

POLITICAL ACTIVISM: POST-COMMUNIST CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN EAST CENTRAL EUROPE

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ABSTRACT: Contrary to standard narratives on the declining function of parties in fostering political participation, this article argues that far from abandoning the cause of participation, post-communist political parties diversified the understanding of the party as a mobilizing agency by adapting their internal organizations. On the basis of a mid-range number of cases (e.g. Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia) the study identified different patterns of evolution within a complex interaction effect between participation and organizational development. The peculiarity of the parties' organization and functions has shaped political participation both as an opportunity structure (legitimizing the political system and increasing citizens' involvement in politics) and as a democratic challenge (increasing the propensity of parties towards populism, 'seasonal' membership, corruption and clientelism).

KEYWORDS: electoral turnout, organization, participation, political parties, post-communism

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1. Introduction

Post-communist parties were born and developed in a context characterized by low levels of social trust and community engagement, as well as by limited voluntary associational membership. With few exceptions, indicators such as participation in elections, party membership, the balance of power within a party's internal life, the level of activism among party members (level of subscriptions or time invested in party activities) or the sense of partisan attachment evidenced from the outset limited commitment to traditional forms of political participation.

After the mobilization of the late 1980s and the early 1990s, post-communist democracies registered an abrupt decline in terms of electoral participation, with averages below 40%. The highly emotional character of the 'inaugural' elections and the perception that a great deal was at stake (i.e. – a new start) encouraged participation, whereas the routinized elections that followed aroused less enthusiasm (Kostadinova 2003; Pacek *et al.* 2009).

In this context, the literature analyzed various determinants in order to gauge the depth and breadth of this disenchantment. While some of these determinants are contingent upon post-communist political events, in other cases there are strong similarities with the evolutions identified on Western ground. Cultural explanations focused on the post-communist electorates' limited opportunities to accumulate political learning and scant party identification. In parallel, a number of studies demonstrated that institutional choices were a major explanatory factor. In this regard, Pacek *et al.* (2009) nicely demonstrated that, rather than the presidential or parliamentary elections, variations in turnout could be linked to the perception of what was at stake in the election under scrutiny. Others focused on a variable combination of social and economic hardship and frustration with corrupt politicians (Kostandinova 2009). However, economy-based explanations were soon challenged on the grounds that the limited electoral participation was not exclusively linked to the context of the post-2007 economic crisis; the improving economic conditions in most East Central European (ECE) countries during the early 2000s did not correspond to a positive trend in terms of electoral participation. More recent studies have not found any relationship between levels of corruption and electoral turnout (Pacek *et al.* 2009). Other scholars have considered the impact of the perception of democracy on the dynamics of electoral participation. Karp and Milazzo (2015, 100) have observed that a considerable proportion of citizens in the post-communist countries remain skeptical about democracy and dissatisfied with democratic performance. Their diagnosis matches Ceka's observation that voters in post-communist polities with higher-quality institutions have lower levels of political

trust and participation (2014). The explanation provided is linked to the weight of historical legacies that have left post-communist citizens unprepared to deal with political competition. Note also that international factors have been included among the main determinants. Vachudova and Hooghe (2009) analyzed the standardizing impact of the European Union (EU), which pulled initially divergent political agendas toward the market. The complex process of accession drastically limited not only the differences among *the standard menus of parties*, but also the room for maneuver available to governing parties and, finally yet importantly, the list of credible options for the electorate.

In parallel, the growing body of literature focused on the organizational characteristics of post-communist parties and the intimate relationship with the state has emphasized their inability to foster representation. The core of the literature consensually agrees that post-communist parties gave priority first to their voters and less to their traditional membership organizations (Enyedi 2006). Different explanatory factors were mentioned. A category of determinants focused on the political context and institutional legacies, more precisely on the diffusion of anti-political sentiments inherited from the 1980s' traditions of dissidence (van Biezen 2003). Starting with the second free elections, the elites' reluctance to deal with parties progressively vanished¹, while the citizenry remained 'sceptical' about the parties' roles and performances in the new democratic settings.

The literature consensually pinpointed to the East European parties' lack of 'domestic models' of reference beyond the communist organizational patterns. With relatively few exceptions (e.g. the Independent Smallholders' Party (FKgP) in Hungary or the Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) in the Czech Republic), most of the revived historical parties failed to guarantee organizational continuity with their previous networks. One prominent feature of the East European politics used to refer to the successor parties' rapid adaptation to the new political circumstances as a direct consequence of the inherited territorial and membership organizations (Grzymala-Busse 2002; van Biezen 2003). Still, the Polish, Slovak and Hungarian most recent evolutions have progressively fine-tuned these assumptions (Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2015).

A correlated determinant was the ideological fuzziness and instability. Post-communist parties cultivated their autonomy from the electorate, and valorized their 'in office' functions, while chiselling their ideological profile in compliance with pragmatic and flexible, all-embracing electoral strategies. After various alternations in pow-

¹ The provision from the post-communist constitutions are particularly relevant to this point. Parties are generally defined as fundamental democratic institutions participating in the formation of the political will of the people (for more details see the following section 3).

er, without clear ideological profiles, the parties' image deficit was emphasized by numerous corruption scandals, and populist parties cyclically multiplied. All in all, throughout the entire region, loose coherence between parties, programmes and candidates could be identified, with direct consequences in terms of parties' limited ability to motivate voters and, in general, to improve the citizens' expectations about democracy. In brief, relatively undersized post-communist organizations conformed to the two dimensional phenomenon identified by the literature (Scarrow 2000, 83): on the demand side, electorally oriented parties had a diminished interest in members' services (either in terms of time spent or resources) considering the intense relationship with the state and their professionalization. On the supply side, the citizens' low interest in enrolling in parties, due to both communist experiences and post-communist disillusionment, testified to a declining political attachment.

More recent analyses have re-evaluated the relevance of organizational strength. Tavits (2012, p. 411) beautifully illustrated that there are solid reasons for parties to focus on building strong organizations considering that "party organizational strength influences party unity in parliament via collective electoral benefits that it helps to provide". In a complementary line of analysis, Gherghina (2014a) has focused on the post-communist parties' conceptualization of membership and found empirical evidence that political parties with more regulations benefit from having larger membership organizations.

Far less attention, however, has been paid to the roles and strategies of parties in promoting political socialization and citizens' participation. The following analysis aims to provide a comprehensive comparative analysis of how participation in the post-communist area evolved, focusing in particular on the extent to which the patterns of party organization influence participation. The article thus revisits post-communist parties as agencies of participation by questioning their practices in terms of grassroots participation and electoral mobilization. More specifically, the article argues that, despite the parties' inability to ensure participation in terms of electoral mobilization, party identification or political enrollment, in the new democracies parties still rely on membership structures in order to ensure alternative party functions (political legitimacy, electoral campaigning, financial survival, etc.). However, as the analysis will emphasize, most of the traditional party roles have mutated in the region, reinforcing, in some cases, defective political behaviors and political pathologies (patronage, populism). The various elements underpinning the features of political participation both as an opportunity structure (legitimizing the political system and increasing citizens' involvement in politics) and as a democratic challenge (enhancing party propensity to populism, 'seasonal' membership, corruption and clientelism) will be analyzed in six

post-communist countries: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. For the sake of precision, the three Baltic States and Slovenia have been excluded from the analysis. While transition to democracy in the case of the six former Warsaw Pact countries has regularly been depicted as a tridimensional process and the national integration was less problematic² (Offe 1991), the process of democratization in the post-Soviet countries or former Yugoslavia was shaped by specific variables, *in primis* the complex legal recognition of the borders and of those citizens with multiple identities that competed with the newly shaped national allegiance (Kuzio 2001, 169).

The analysis is organized into four sections. The first reviews the relationship between participation and party politics. The second section reconstructs the evolution of political participation in the post-communist region between 1990 and 2014. The third section provides an analysis of the main features of the membership organizations of the main parliamentary political parties in terms of party practices. The last section discusses the data and the theoretical implications of our findings.

2. Theoretical framework: political parties and political participation in contemporary democracies

Political parties perform an active role in shaping society and ensuring political representation. Party functions seem to be perennial, irrespective of historical transformations (Sartori 2005). Nevertheless, the party role in fostering participation differs substantially across time. According to the literature, political parties as agents of democracy were side effects of the extension of universal suffrage (van Biezen 2003). Active grassroots involvement in politics and strong identification with parties came to legitimize political organizations. A series of trade-offs within party arrangements continuously encouraged extensive participation and political mobilization. Party leaders formally and substantially empowered party activists, who directly contributed to defining party strategies and provided resources for parties' organizations. However, recent social-economic, cultural and communicational, institutional and political transformations challenged traditional parties in at least four areas: in their relationship with society, in their patterns of organization, in the relation between national and transnational parties at a European level, and in their role in national government (Müller-Rommel 2016, 2-3).

Contemporary parties exhibit a systemic inability to act as political linkages between

² This was also the case in the velvet division of the former Czechoslovakia.

citizens and the state. A two-level failure confirms the profound party decline. On the one hand, low electoral turnouts and citizens' mistrust in parties emerged within a context of high levels of education, new values favoring participatory styles, and weakened class structure (Müller-Rommel 2016, 2). On the other hand, the deficit in intra-organizational management continuously diminishes the impact of party members on internal balances of power. This twofold process has widened the gap between citizens and political parties. The withdrawal of members from party organizations and the citizens' focus on private forms of participation has undermined the once classic function of connecting citizens and the state (Van Biezen *et al.* 2012, Mair 2013, Müller-Rommel 2016). At the same time, parties willingly turned their backs on the public; strengthening their dependence on the state, and acting, thus, as governing agencies (Mair 2013). Exogenous constraints, such as Europeanization, the IMF agreements and the EU Commission's oversight, exacerbate the lack of party responsiveness to citizens' wants and needs (Katz 2014, Müller-Rommel 2016). The limited autonomy of parties in setting policies within intra-party organizations affects the political capacity to tailor collective and selective incentives for party followers (Müller-Rommel 2016).

Despite the above-mentioned challenges political parties are still the main channels of dialogue between political representatives in public offices and the public. Party enrollment strategies and intra-party political socialization predefine theoretical expectations with regards to the creation of viable accountability mechanisms. Party members continue to play a role in building governing teams and preparing leaders for public office, financing the party, and conducting door-to-door electoral campaigns (Seyd and Whitely 2002; Scarrow 2014). In some cases, members directly take part in preparing elections, contribute to gathering material resources, and ensure voter stability. Moreover, constituency ties become particularly important in times of crisis: bringing members back is tantamount, at least rhetorically, to an attempt to recover political credibility. Not all parties are simply abandoning the cause of participation. Numerous internal reforms have sought to boost voters' participation in the party decision-making process and to increase membership ratios through organizational readjustments – e.g. by democratizing leadership selection, enhancing virtual communication with potential members, and organizing online platforms for public deliberation (Scarrow 2014). In recent decades, statutory opportunity structures endowed party members with increasing formal attributes. For instance, 20% of the parties in European countries democratized the internal selection of their party leaderships (Pilet and Cross 2014). Even in new democracies, often cited as examples of defective political participation and low levels of party mobilization, disempowered party rank and file are far from being the general rule, at least as regards membership figures (Spirova 2007).

In most of the contemporary democracies, efforts by parties to preserve some function in fostering participation entails, in different formats and with different tools, the same mass party strategy: effective trade-offs between party leadership and the electorate together with a secured membership loyalty. In this context, party members are genuine representatives of party deliberative democracy, subunits of party organizations whose empowerment deepens the organizational democratization, but more importantly, the systemic quality of democracy (Katz 2014). Several recent trends point to an endeavor to shape large and accountable political organizations. The practice of party 'constitutionalization' induces parties to create bureaucratized mass organizations (van Biezen 2012, Casal Bértoa and van Biezen 2014). The contemporary standards of good practices in party functions directly connect party organizational adaptation and political participation (e.g. The Code of Good Practices in the Field of Political Parties). In such documents, defective representation often concerns opaque (corrupted) party politics.

The relationship between party organizational transformation and political mobilization substantiates at the normative level the existence of a connection between party democracy and active citizenship. The disenchantment with party politics directly refers to a party malfunction or superficial party reforms. Parties, now abandoned by activists, are increasingly entrenched in the state's offices and dependent on the state's resources. In practice, this evolution entailed a shift in party functioning, according to three distinct scenarios of party linkage decline.

First, some parties favor party appointees in public offices, whilst political leaders distribute selective and collective incentives directly to the public (Blondel 2002). Patronage and electoral clientelism flourish, particularly in the new democracies, as new social and political ties. Political parties, acting as public utilities, consciously opt to neglect the development of local party sections and large membership bases (van Biezen and Kopecký 2007). In these cases, organizational adaptation does not include substantial membership empowerment; rather, it encourages personalized decision-making networks and the overlap between party employees/officials and party membership (van Biezen 2012). An alternative model, though unusual in practice, would allow parties to maintain the grassroots structures – at least at a minimal threshold – through the distribution of selective incentives targeting party loyalists (Gauja 2015).

Second, parties (particularly newly created ones) try to maximize the public dissatisfaction with politics without genuinely connecting with voters and potential members. Parties embrace political appeals constructed on the classic populist dichotomy between the 'purity of the people' versus the 'corrupt elites' (Tarchi 2015). The organizations in this second category are less inclined to ensure legitimacy by numbers. Instead,

populist and radical-right parties focus on deliberative procedures within the organization as means to ensure participation.

Third, parties continue their initial evolution unfazed. They experience a constant decline in membership, whereas the party leadership remains insulated from the public. The parties' defective behaviors in acting as collective actors and expressing voters' preferences boost the withdrawal of public support even further (party electoral decline, splits, newcomers, etc.). In most of these cases, the active yet disillusioned public redirects its attention to alternative forms of participation – such as social movements – in order to express discontent with politics (Della Porta and Andretta 2013).

These three divergent (theoretical) models show a defective party-mass linkage in contemporary democracies. In fact, they refer to different narratives of parties' failure to foster participation in contemporary democracies. Although a political party as an agency of political participation is the main reference when assessing and reforming party functioning, the three dimensions suggest that recent developments widen the gap between party leaders and the public. They seem to imply a refusal by parties to genuinely adapt to changes in the political environment in order to preserve social ties. This article challenges this narrative of party failure. It investigates the emergence of the three scenarios of recent party adaptation in the new democracies to point to the complementarity of party development strategies and to suggest the compatibility of such mutations with the participatory ideal.

3. Post-communist parties and the formation of the political will

At the end of the 1980s, a wave of democratization swept through the entire post-communist area. The former communist countries underwent a complex triple or even quadruple transition that simultaneously included transformations of a political, economic, and socio-cultural nature along with transformations of 'stateness' (Offe 1991). By the beginning of the new century, all of those countries had developed institutional infrastructures inspired by Western liberal democracies. These immediate changes did not succeed in creating authentic democratic settings in all the polities. According to Freedom House figures, the successful and rapid diffusion of democratic settings in Hungary, Poland or the Czech Republic differs from the hesitant path of Romania, and intermittent reforms in Bulgaria or Slovakia. From an economic and social point of view, an abrupt drop in GDP, rising unemployment and, more in general, worsened macroeconomic conditions and diminished quality of life accompanied the process of democratization. In parallel with the general retreat of the state from the provision of

social services, the citizens' sense of exclusion strengthened. Not surprisingly, these elements were regularly cited as particularly fertile ground for disillusionment with politics, rising corruption, and limited political efficacy.

From the early 1990s onwards, post-communist parties have been subjected to various forms of regulation with direct and indirect consequences on both the demand and supply side. The importance of parties was rapidly taken for granted, as testified by the consensual constitutionalization of political parties as fundamental democratic institutions (van Biezen 2012) and the prevalence of a militant-kind of democracy (van Biezen and Borz 2012). As a direct consequence with of the original imposition of a State acting as a "guardian of democracy" (Casal Bértoa and van Biezen 2014, 300), one of the first tasks of the post-communist legislator was the regulation of political parties as organizations, regulation that exceeded Western criteria (van Biezen and Piccio 2013).

In direct connection with the shared definition of parties as essential democratic institutions that participate in the formation of the political will of the people, one of the first elements the party laws dealt with was the degree of popular support, in several cases coupled with criteria of geographic distribution. The minimum number of members required by the party laws varies from 3 members in Romania to 10,000 in Slovakia (Casal Bértoa and van Biezen 2014, 302). A similar heterogeneity emerges in relation to criteria linked to the parties' internal life: while the Slovak provision allows a relatively high degree of discretion, the regulation of internal structures and processes in Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania is more prescriptive, requiring, for example, specific deadlines for convening their highest organs (Casal Bértoa and van Biezen 2014). When it comes to elements like the party organizations' internal democracy, national regulations delegate these elements to the decision of individual parties' statutory documents. On this ground, Gherghina (2014a) observed an asymmetry between the presence of very few conditions for eligibility to become a member coupled with a wide range of rights for these and a lack of specific duties. Moreover, very few statutory documents explicitly demand members to get involved in forms of intra-party democracy. It looks like post-communist parties, beyond differences of origins or ideological stances, tend to make internal participation optional for their members (Gherghina 2014a).

These general observations have one major implication for this study: increases in the intensity of the regulation, coupled with changes in other areas such the electoral reforms, have been moved by the parliamentary parties' intent to control the competition and hamper new parties from successfully entering Parliament (van Biezen and Rashkova 2012). These evolutions were possible considering that post-communist parties found themselves from the early 90s onward in the strategic position of being both

“the governors and the governed” of the law (Gauja 2010, 7). Over the last decade, parties were obliged to make more or less important concessions to domestic and international players (e.g. Constitutional Courts, Venice Commission) or networks of NGOs and institutes specialized in democracy monitoring in order to smoothen the competition requirements.

In parallel with the definition of the regulation of political parties as organizations, the post-communist legislator took (rapid) interest in codifying party finances as a way to prop parties with under-developed organizations (Booth and Robbins 2010). In most cases, a single document was issued containing both provisions on party organization and financial resources (Casal Bértoa and van Biezen 2014). Subject to regular amendments, van Biezen and Rashkova (2012) observed that the most substantial expansion of regulation in terms of party politics has occurred in the area of party financing in particular, which is compliant with the national and international increased pressures to enhance transparency and to fight corruption. Less consensual observations emerge in relation to the impact on party system. While authors like Booth and Robbins (2010) link the availability of funds to a decreased level of party replacement and volatility, more skeptical diagnoses are provided by scholars like Tavits (2007).

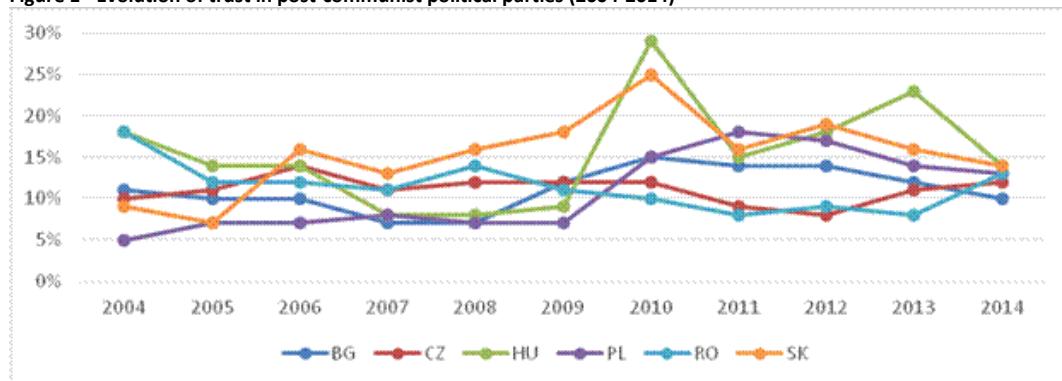
3.1. Post-communist parties and the endemic decline of political participation

Whilst the initial leitmotiv praised parties as barometers of democracy, they have rapidly become the *troublemakers* of politics. Nevertheless, as illustrated by Figure 1, there is an important variation in the level of trust across both space and time. Average levels of trust as low as 10.73% can be found in Romania, while average levels of over 15% can be found in Hungary and Poland. At the national level, the highest level of trust is registered in Hungary in 2010 (29%), two months after Fidesz’s sweeping victory associated not only with a highly discredited left-wing pillar, but also with expectations that Fidesz would put Hungary back on track for economic growth after the risks of financial collapse under the previous socialist government. At the other extreme, trust levels of 5% can be found in 2004 (Poland).

Political participation did not live up to the initial expectations. Within the proportional-based systems, the choice of closed or (semi-) open list do not generate different evolutions in terms of electoral participation. On this ground, the representational exclusion in post-communist Europe was consequently high in comparison with Western democracies, in particular during the first decade. In parallel, while the party system size tended to be larger in the post-communist area than in

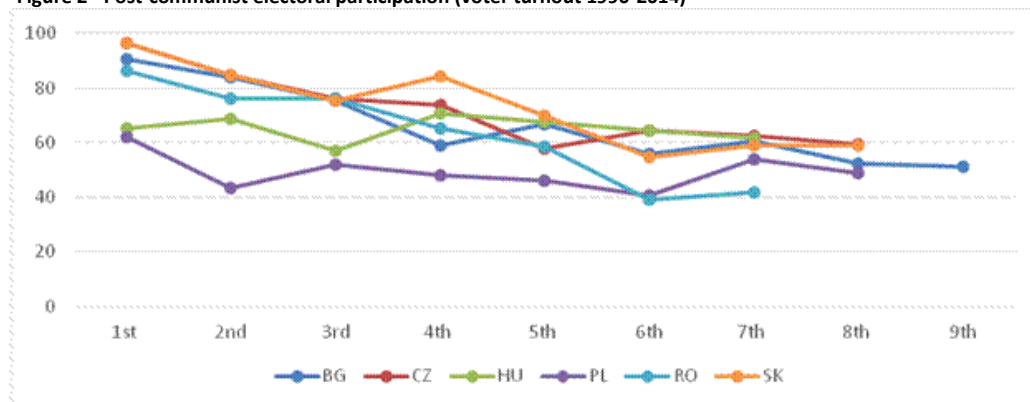
consolidated Western democracies, the effective numbers of parliamentary parties in the most recent elections³ declined in Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia, whereas it has gone up in the Czech Republic and Bulgaria.

Figure 1 - Evolution of trust in post-communist political parties (2004-2014)



Source: Standard Eurobarometer survey

Figure 2 - Post-communist electoral participation (voter turnout 1990-2014)



Source: IDEA Voter Turnout Database

Since 1990, 47 parliamentary elections have been organized in the six countries analyzed. On average, parliamentary elections have been held every three years. In the first quarter century of post-communism, electoral data show an abrupt decline of vot-

³ Based on Gallagher (2015).

er turnout in all the countries (Figure 2). The average regional value of the electoral turnout has remained well below the EU average, although large fluctuations can be observed (Pacek *et al.* 2009). If we refer to the trends in terms of voter turnout (calculated as total number of votes cast for the lower chamber divided by the number of registered voters – Figure 2), the highest level of electoral participation was registered in the 1990 Czechoslovakian elections (96.33), while the lowest percentage was recorded in Romania on the occasion of the 2008 parliamentary elections (39.2). Bearing in mind the differences between one election and another within the same country or potential variations due to elections for different institutions, the Romanian electorate illustrates the most rapid passage from euphoria to apathy, followed by Bulgaria, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. In Poland and Hungary, levels of participation are subject to fewer variations. On average, the Slovak electorate is characterized by the highest level of mobilization, closely followed by the Czech case. The Bulgarian, Hungarian, and the Romanian cases are in-between in terms of turnout average. Poland is characterized by the lowest level of electoral participation in our sample. Two main scenarios emerge from these findings. The first pledges in favor of a post-communist voter “withdrawal” due to hostility against a disappointing political arena, while the other scenario emphasizes the broad room for maneuver available to new political formations based on personalist and populist appeals (Pop-Elecheș 2010).

Before we discuss how parties behave in this context pervaded by electoral disenchantment, it is important to assess the general features of post-communist parties’ relations with organizational matters. Considering the regional lack of familiarity with democracy, the low level of partisan continuity, as well as the dilettante character of politics in the early 1990s, as previously observed, post-communist parties focused their attention almost exclusively on electoral mobilization. By the second elections, most of the anti-communist groups or clubs and the other early 1990s parties had changed from conglomerate groups to parties based on individual membership in compliance with the requirements of the party laws already in force; but, for the most part, they maintained loose organizational settings and weak ideological features.

Despite variation across countries and across political parties within the same country, as well as variation across time, scholars agree that the classic model of mass party organization has had limited visibility in post-communism. Note that the level of party membership in the new European democracies (taken as a percentage of the national electorate) is well below the M/E ratio of the long-established democracies⁴. Compari-

⁴ The aggregate data we are presenting in Table 1 is based on information provided by individual parties (see the different sources quoted). The usual caveats apply: the data reliability and the lack of comprehensive and detailed party records (Mair and van Biezen 2001).

son of data from the end of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century (Table 1) shows that the average membership — both in absolute number and as a percentage of the electorate — is lower for all of our cases with the exception of Bulgaria, which indicates a synergy with the downward trend identified in Western democracies (van Biezen *et al.* 2012). Overall, Bulgaria and Romania’s electorates exhibit higher levels of party membership, while the lowest levels belong to Hungary and Poland

Table 1 - Post-Communist Party Enrollment

<i>Country</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Total party membership (M)</i>	<i>Membership as % of electorate (M/E)</i>
Bulgaria	1990s	n.a	n.a
	2002	443600	6.41
	2008	399121	5.6
Czech Republic	1993	545000	7.04
	1999	319800	3.94
	2008	165425	1.99
Hungary	1990	165300	2.11
	1999	173600	2.15
	2008	123932	1.54
Poland	1990s	n.a	n.a
	2000	326500	1.15
	2009	304465	0.99
Romania	1990	n.a	n.a
	2003	1304729	7.07
	2007	1129735	6.2
Slovakia	1994	127500	3.29
	2000	165277	4.11
	2007	86296	2.02

M – the aggregate sum for the overall level of membership across all parties for which figures are available (expressed in raw numbers); M/E ratio - party membership taken as a percentage of the national electorate (registered voters in previous elections).

Membership measured as change in percentage points Sources: Mair and Van Biezen (2001), Spirova (2005), Ionaşcu and Soare (2011), Van Biezen et al. (2012).

4. Organizational development and participation

In the East Central European (ECE) region, the weak party grassroots and the visible decline in political mobilization contributed to a volatile political scene. Numerous changes occurred in the party systems in the region – above all favoring party switching, party mergers, and splits as means of political survival (Gherghina 2014a, 2014b). Several adaptive features alternatively prevailed in order to tame the ongoing party decline. At the structural level, a certain degree of organizational continuity and adaptation directly contributed to the predictability of party politics and party activism. Organizational continuity and strength constitute catalysts in shaping and maintaining party-member and party-voter relations. At the infra-party level, organizational incentives also favored participation. Inclusive candidate selection procedures, for instance, could increase the internal party democracy and act as incentives to participate in the party life. Alternatively, political parties may also choose ideological repositioning or rhetorical adaptations. For instance, new party leaders could disregard the traditional structure of incentives and choose to radicalize or polarize the political claims in order to elude the issue of legitimacy by numbers (and thus the entire issue of participation). Such political shortcuts in redefining the party as an agency of participation emerged under the different forms in all the countries in our sample.

4.1. Structural determinants – organizational stability and strength

In the post-communist region, most party systems are far from being stable. The electoral failure of mainstream parties or the rise in power of new parties introduced political uncertainty, disenchanted citizens and the erosion of confidence in the democratic institutions. While almost all parties in Romania, the Czech Republic, and Hungary survived through the 1990s, countries such as Poland and Slovakia saw major party reshuffles in the early 2000s, and only recently have they shown patterns of party stabilization (Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2015).

Table 2 - Party membership in the ECE parties

COUNTRY	PARTY	1990-2000		2000-2010		2010-present	
		Mean M/E	STD	Mean M/E	STD	Mean M/E	STD
Hungary	MSZP	0.51	0.07	0.41	0.04	0.38	0.02
	FIDESZ	0.15	0.05	0.32	0.12	0.50	0.00
	SZDSZ	0.33	0.12	0.31	0.04		
	MDF	0.33	0.05	0.27	0.07	0.14	0.00
	FKGP	0.94	0.33	1.44	0.09		
Czech Republic	KSČM	2.37	0.79	1.19	0.24	0.73	0.06
	ČSSD	0.17	0.04	0.21	0.02	0.28	0.01
	KDU-ČSL	0.82	0.11	0.57	0.08	0.39	0.03
	ODS	0.27	0.02	0.29	0.07	0.31	0.07
Poland	SLD	0.26*	na	0.33	0.12	0.16	0.05
	PSL	0.58*	na	0.45	0.06	0.42	0.01
	PiS					0.07	0.00
	PO			0.08	0.02	0.15	0.01
Romania	PSD	2.38	2.37	2.67	0.92	2.61	0.27
	PNTCD	2.21	2.11	0.26	0.09	0.18	0.02
	PNL			0.57	0.14	0.18	0.02
	PD	1.36	0.79	0.69	0.19	1.07	0.69
Slovakia	HZDS	1.09	0.56	0.87	0.13	0.33	0.28
	SDL	0.6	0.11				
	KDH	0.6	0.23	0.43	0.11	0.31	0.04
	SDKU-DS			0.14	0.04	0.12	0.04
	SMER-SD			0.28	0.11	0.37	0.01

M/E – individual party membership taken as a percentage of the national electorate registered in previous elections;

Mean M/E – the mean value of the M/E ratio for each of the three periods; STD – standard deviation

Source: Own calculations based on registration figures from International IDEA, Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance online: <http://www.idea.int>; the membership figures are taken from the Members and Activists of Political Parties project: <http://www.projectmapp.eu>. (For the countries: Poland (Paczeński 2014), Slovakia (Zemanik, 2015), Hungary (Enyedi, 2014), Czech Republic (Linek, 2014), Romania (Ionașcu and Soare 2014). For Poland see van Biezen et al. 2012, Szczerbiak 2013.

*based on average membership (Tavits 2013)

Hungary: MSZP- Hungarian Socialist Party; FIDESZ- Hungarian Civic Alliance; SZDSZ - Alliance of Free Democrats – Hungarian Liberal Party; MDF- The Hungarian Democratic Forum; FKGP- The Independent Smallholders' Party; Czech Republic: KSČM- The Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia; ČSSD- The Czech Social Democratic Party; KDU-ČSL- The Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party; ODS- The Civic Democratic Party; Poland: SLD - Democratic Left Alliance; PSL-The Polish People's Party; PiS- Law and Justice; PO-Civic Platform; Romania: PSD- Social Democratic Party; PNTCD- The Christian Democratic National Peasants' Party; PNL-National Liberal Party; PD- Democratic Party; Slovakia: HZDS The People's Party – Movement for a Democratic Slovakia; SDL - The Party of the Democratic Left; KDH- The Christian Democratic Movement; SDKU-DS The Slovak Democratic and Christian Union – Democratic Party; SMER-SD -Direction – Social Democracy.

While the Bulgarian socialists remained unchallenged, regular changes in the composition of the center-right political supply occurred. Overall, post-communist party politics have been characterized by regular swings in parliamentary composition and doors wide open to new (atypical) parties and candidates. Both party and electoral regulations contributed to this volatile party behavior. Nevertheless, new parties continuously succeeded to win representation in Parliament, rebooting from time to time the political system and challenging the creation of stable party organizations (see Table 2⁵).

In terms of organizational development, two clusters of countries emerged (Tables 1 and 2). On the one hand, the parties in Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic suffer from organizational anemia. On the other hand, outliers such as Romania and Bulgaria encourage participation. In these latter cases, legislative provisions establishing both constraints on party enrollment in electoral campaigns and positive incentives to run for office induced parties to engage in a race to obtain members and supporters (Gherghina 2014a). Despite these trends, the analysis of parties as agents of participation remains disputed. First, the overall enrollment figures raise questions about data reliability (particularly when official party claims on membership figures are compared with individual level surveys). For instance, even though Poland is the extreme example of low party mobilization (Gwiazda 2009) and Romania represents the other end of the spectrum with its extreme organizational solidity (Ionașcu and Soare 2011), the capacity of parties to gather followers seems quite similar in various surveys. Recent EVS data show comparable percentages of unaffiliated citizens: 95.3% in Poland and 91.65% in Romania. The Romanian 2.9% active party membership is the highest ratio in the region. However, the differences across post-communist countries are not significant. Second, the membership figures should be assessed with caution because of the high levels of intra-country variations. Not all parties failed to develop party organizations, just as not all parties abandoned the cause of political participation. Exceptions rapidly emerged in all our cases.

A peculiar situation concerned the Polish *Solidarność*, which inherited the 1980s trade union network with a membership then estimated at around ten million; but by the time of its renewed status in the 1990s, membership was only around 20% (Aleksandrowicz *et al.* 2009, 19). The Czech KSČM, the Bulgarian Socialists and the Romanian Social-Democrats continued unhindered the politics of mobilization and electoral recruitment (Grzymala-Busse 2002, Spirova 2005, Gherghina 2014b). Although in both Romania and Bulgaria, the successor parties' one million members may have been overestimated in the early 1990s (Szajkowski 1991, Spirova 2005), the left-wing parties

⁵ The data in Table 2 illustrate the evolution in the mean of M/E ratio over three periods: 1990-2000, 2000-2010, 2010-present.

benefited from a mass party bureaucratized organization and an unparalleled ability to reach territorial units. The subsequent membership figures, accounting for 2% of the Romanian electorate, are quite similar to those of the Bulgarian BSP in the 2000s. Even in countries where the renewed social-democracy parties did not survive, such as the Slovak Party of the Democratic Left (SDL), the social-democrats' pattern of organization dominated the political scene in the 1990s (Table 2). The Slovakian HZDS illustrates the organizational hegemony of the (populist) left parties during the initial phase of transition. The initial advantage of the successor parties had virtually no counterweight in terms of enrollment (Table 2). The Polish Peasants' Party represents a major exception; at various times, its membership exceeds that of all other parties and has one of the most capillary territorial structure (Tavits 2013).

Table 3. Causal explanations for the decline in the party participatory function

	Bulgaria	Poland	Hungary	Romania	Czech Republic	Slovakia
Party age	Partially stable	Re-stabilization	Stable	Stable	De-Stabilization	Re-stabilization
New parties (% seats)*	10.83	15.22	19.10	14.79	30.5	10.67
Candidate selection (centralization/decentralization)	Centralized (but structural volatility)	Moderate Centralization	Highly centralized	Moderate Centralization	Moderate Centralization	Centralization
Membership	High	Low	Low	High	Low	Low
Populist/Radical Claims	Radicalism	Populism & Radicalism	Radicalism	Populism	Populism	Populism

*Electoral results, most recent parliamentary elections (Chamber of Deputies)

The frailty of the post-communist camp gave rise to weak and fluid right-wing party organizations. Exceptionally, in Romania, the Christian Democrats' (PNTCD), the most important opponent of the social-democrats during the 1990s, managed to counterbalance the social democrats' organizational drive. The party declared 800000 members in the early 1990s. Nevertheless, subsequent party records from the party's time

in government, 1996-2000, listing between 150,000 and 200,000 persons, suggest its lack of capacity to build strongholds and a general culture of party activism.

Party age played an important role in developing party participatory functions (Table 3). Starting in the 2000s, parties on the right side of the political spectrum were able to evolve in terms of co-opting and including new members. The phenomenon was far from being homogenous. In Hungary, both of the main parliamentary parties remained uninterested in the idea of recruiting members (Enyedi and Linek 2008, 461). The FIDESZ steadily increased its membership in the 2000s, but the M/E ratio was inferior to those of other countries and parties in the region (Table 3). Paradoxically, in Hungary, the only party to accomplish the objective of mass organization was the Independent Smallholders, Agrarian Workers and Civic Party (FKgP). The party became the leader of the opposition at the end of the 1990s. Despite high membership figures, FKgP did not survive corruption scandals and internal divisions in the 2000s (Landsford 2015). Divergent evolutions characterize the right-wing parties in post-communist countries. The Czech KDU-ČSL was able to reach a small yet stable electorate in the rural and catholic areas. Nevertheless, after the 1990s the party suffered a continuous membership decline. The Romanian liberals, although successful in organizing the party and building organizations in the 2000s, also show signs of declining membership figures. Conversely, in Poland, the newly-created conservative and liberal parties (such as Civic Platform (PO) or Law and Justice (PiS) both created in 2001) maintained low membership bases and loose organizational structures. Electoral support, and the stabilization of party roles as parliamentary and governmental parties, did not foster participation.

4.2. Internal structure of incentives: organizational reforms and party democracy

In the literature, the eclectic configurations of the ECE parties are directly connected to internal arrangements and organizational strategies. The differences among parties as agencies of participation seem to suggest a 'reluctance' to reach constituents or the leaders' strategic interests in preserving disempowered audiences. Previous studies have suggested that, in the past decade and in the case of mainstream parties, party statutory arrangements' (e.g. the degree of specification and the substantive structure of incentives claimed by the parties' formal documents) impact on membership figures (Gherghina 2014a). Citizens in the region seem to pay attention to party initiatives to democratize the organizations. From this perspective, the absence of political reforms may explain why some parties are failing to mobilize voters and activists. Despite the myriad of rights and obligations mentioned in some party statutory provisions, ECE

parties lack a genuine membership empowerment. For instance, the tendency to hold party primaries is still marginal in the post-communist democracies. There is a wide variety of cases in regard to the structure of formal incentives provided by the post-communist parties (Table 3).

At one extreme, the Hungarian parties have undergone few reconfigurations over time and maintain high levels of centralization (Ilonszki and Várnagy 2014). The elite-driven parties reject elements of substantial party democratization. Marginal procedures giving the appearance of democratization have not fundamentally changed the functioning of parties - e.g. the Social Democrats have codified a nomination procedure whereby candidates for party leadership can either be supported by a special committee or should gather the support of at least one third of the electors (Ilonszki and Várnagy 2014).

Moderate quests to decentralize the candidate selection process emerged in other countries in the region. For instance, in Slovakia, most parties such as the Slovak National Party, the Hungarian Community Party, the People's Party, the Christian Democratic Movement select and recall the party chairmen through party conventions. Only the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKÚ-DS) tried to innovate by providing party members with the ability to select the electoral party leader in party primaries (Rybář and Deegan-Krause 2009). In practice, only moderate levels of internal party competition and little membership empowerment emerged in the Slovakian case. In a similar situation, in Poland the election of party leadership depends primarily on party Congresses (Hartliński 2013). Other party bodies can select or remove from office the president of the party in-between congresses – such in the cases of the Democratic Left Alliance or the Polish People's Party. Recently reformed, two parties also allow for the organization of party primaries: The Civic Platform (PO) since 2013 and the Democratic Left alliance (since 2012 but only as an alternative route in leadership selection). Despite these reforms, the incumbency levels remain high and there is a closed structure of party competition in what concerns party leadership structures (Hartliński 2013). At the opposite extreme, the Romanian mainstream parties have undergone numerous internal reforms both in what concerns the recruitment of party leadership and of party representatives in public offices. Since 2002, the Liberals have adopted for several years an internal procedure based on a "meritocratic criterion". The party leadership had the right to draw up the candidate lists for local branches with poor electoral performances. Conversely, the national leadership only validated the lists of candidates provided by local organizations when local electoral results had been above the national average. In 2003, the Social Democrats implemented the closed primaries system (for two-thirds of the candidates running for the Parliament) but the procedure

was applied on only one occasion. In the Romanian case, the various reforms paid off. Romanian parties are one of few examples of high levels of leadership renewal. Nevertheless, in all the above cases, the party configurations of power did not entail major outcomes in terms of membership recruitment (or, at least at first glance, in the electoral performance). In the Hungarian case, the Socialists did not improve their membership figures, whereas in the Romanian case no substantial change at the grassroots level resulted from various reforms. In this latter example, even recent non-codified procedures (e.g. the most inclusive and decentralized candidate selection procedure based on opinion polls) do not entail changes in the membership structures. Restrictive formal provisions act in a similar manner. Specific stipulations codifying the need for a 'recommendation' in order to join a party should foster internal cohesion; but at the same time they are major impediments to shaping inclusive party membership recruitment. Such dispositions can be found in the Polish case, which is well known for its weak grassroots. Nevertheless, similar demands have emerged in the case of parties with signs of membership consolidation, such as FIDESZ in Hungary, or in cases of high levels of electoral encapsulation – the Social Democrats in Romania (applied in the early 2000s).

4.3. Radicalism or populism as a substitute for traditional participation

The continuous endeavor to publicize (the appearance of) more democratic patterns of party adaptation is insufficient to assess the impact of formal party arrangements on membership recruitment. Selective incentives that matter for the potential activists (e.g. jobs, financial benefits) are informally defined. Party patronage and electoral clientelism characterized the region even after the enlargement. Throughout the 2000s, numerous corruption scandals generated governmental turnovers, with allegations of illegal campaign financing, mismanagement of state funds, and the political engineering of bureaucratic appointments in order to favor party loyalists (Meyer-Sahling and Veen 2012, Batory 2012, Fink-Hafner 2014). The spoils systems and corruption scandals altered political participation (Pacek *et al.* 2009). However, the absent public did not become a political issue and did not change the parties' strategies in terms of inclusiveness and participation. Instead, new parties emerged claiming to be the genuine representations of an absent public. Populist appeals condemning the 'predatory elites' concerned either the sporadic reactivation of transitional justice and the lustration issue or the extrapolation of the systemic outcomes of the fight against corruption (Pop-Elecheș 2010). Ultrnationalist and racist programs consistent with radical forms of

populism gained representation in Parliaments. Paradoxically, despite their different narratives on participation and democracy, the new movements suffered from weak organizations in regard to both internal cohesion and membership figures (Table 4). Mass media and marginal groups became key tools for gathering electoral support. For example, the Czech extreme-right Workers Party (now banned) was riven by internal quarrels. The party's strategy of establishing an alliance with a neo-Nazi movement benefited it in terms of activism, but this assumed the form of paramilitary organizations (Mareš 2012). Nationalist and xenophobic electoral platforms emerged in Bulgaria as well. In the case of Ataka, created by a journalist, Volen Siderov, the media played a substantial role in the dissemination of the party's messages (Stefanova 2009). Ataka used anti-Turk and anti-Roma rhetoric coupled with an anti-corruption discourse in order to mobilize voters (Genov 2010), but the structure of activists and members remained weak. Anti-Roma sentiments prevailed in Hungary as well (Pirro 2014). The new technologies became the main tools of mobilization (Varga 2014). Jobbik, like the Bulgarian Ataka, relied on rallies in order to promote its ideas. In the case of the 2000 wave of populist parties, the denunciation of corrupted elites was the core of the alternative parties. Polish parties also maximized anti-corruption claims and the rhetoric of crisis (e.g. Self-Defense and the League of Polish Families). These small organizations benefited from active and committed activists usually organized through media outlets (Jasiewicz 2008).

Table 4 - Radical parties' membership/electorate in the ECE countries

		<i>Mean M/E</i>	<i>Mean M/E</i>	<i>Mean M/E</i>
		<i>1990-2000</i>	<i>2000-2010</i>	<i>2010-2014</i>
Romania	PRM	0.17	0.98	0.28
	PPDD			0.27
Slovakia	SNS	0.00	0.00	0.00
Poland	HZDS	1.09	0.87	0.33
	SPR		0.35	0.01
	LPR		0.02	NA
Hungary	Jobbik		0.04	0.15
Czech Republic	ANO-2011			0.02
	PS			0.00

M/E – individual party membership taken as a percentage of the national electorate (registered in previous elections).

Mean M/E – the mean value of the *M/E* ratios (for each of the three periods)

Source: Own calculations based on the *Members and Activists of Political Parties* project: <http://www.projectmapp.eu> (Poland (Paczeński 2014), Slovakia (Zemanik, 2015), Hungary (Enyedi, 2014), Czech Republic (Linek, 2014), Romania (Ionaşcu and Soare 2014).

Not all of these parties were essentially xenophobic. New parties denouncing the corruption of the establishment and the lack of political accountability emerged in different formulas, and they rapidly achieved electoral success. In the Czech Republic, the anti-corruption party formed by a Czech oligarch (Andrej Babiš), in spite of its low membership, obtained 18% of the votes at the elections after three months of existence (Linek 2014). The party falls less under the label of classic radical politics as it adopts mainly an anti-establishment and populist style of conducting electoral campaigns (van Kessel, 2015). In a similar vein, adopting the same Berlusconi model as ANO 2011, the Romanian PPDD emerged in 2011. Dan Diaconescu was the party's informal leader, owner, and main host of a television talk show. Diaconescu used the narrow circle of TV station staff to rule the party, but also local independents, businessmen, and TV audiences in order to build up a membership base. The party's grassroots were weak compared with those of other mainstream parties. Nevertheless, the party came third in the following electoral year. At the same time, the durability of these parties, irrespective of membership bases, varies markedly across the region. While PPDD has been informally dissolved in Parliament, and Samoobrona has disappeared from the legislative arena, other new parties, either radical parties (Jobbik), or populist anti-establishment parties (ANO 2011) seem to have stabilized as mainstream competitors.

5. Conclusions

After an initial wave of revolutionary enthusiasm in the early 1990s, political participation rapidly declined across the entire post-communist region. Electoral turnouts dropped, and trust in political parties vanished. Overall, political parties – already very weak organizations – became isolated from the rest of society. This lack of public participation and disillusionment can be associated with a wide range of determinants: institutions, political culture, socio-economic indicators, international factors, etc. Scholars have argued that democracy without voters and parties without members are common phenomena in post-communism. This interpretation tends to overlook the fact that not all the parties behave in the same manner. Some parties initially remained highly committed to the mass model of party organization they inherited; the Czech KSČM, the Polish SLD and PSL, the Bulgarian BSP, the Romanian PDSR and, to a lesser extent, the Hungarian MSzP and FKgP offered a powerful counter-example to the general trends in this regard and partially conserved their inherited territorial organization and membership. After a decade, even in these cases the once disciplined mass organi-

zation loosened or even completely vanished. The Polish SLD is an example of this phenomenon. Note that while the legislator in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia introduced public funding in the immediate period after the fall of the communist regime, in the rest of the sample the funding of political parties was initially kept to the private sphere (Casal Bértoa and van Biezen 2014). Still, in none of the cases subsidies were contingent upon the parties' ability to generate membership contributions.

When focusing on conventional forms of participation such as party politics, divergent patterns of evolution can be identified.

First, despite the decline of confidence in political parties and public institutions, not all the post-communist parties have failed to become agents of political participation. For instance, some of the successor parties have managed (at least temporarily) to preserve their membership organizations. They have even set a trend in regard to the necessity of party activism for political success (e.g. the socialists in Bulgaria, in Poland or in Romania). Whilst their success has been temporary in the Polish case, the Bulgarian and Romanian socialist parties have remained central political actors for over a quarter of century.

Second, although the literature emphasizes the role of democratic incentives in recruiting new members – e.g. an active role in the leadership selection process, surveys, decision-making abilities, etc. – in the ECE region it seems that rather informal structures of rewards explain the high variation in party organizational adaptation. Specific privileges and incentives act as substitutes in the chain of representation. However, the lack of political participation is not necessarily a form of public contestation. The emergence of anti-establishment parties, although they gathered an impressive number of votes in a very short time, did not change the party organizational configurations. Political parties from the 2000s populist wave, initially social-movements, did not embrace the participatory mechanisms or large organizations. Contestation through rallies and a small but very active (and sometimes violent) body of loyalists were important in shaping the new parties. New technologies and mainstream media were crucial in disseminating party messages. The new parties claiming to represent the silent public do not embrace dissimilar organizational arrangements. The anti-establishment parties remain highly elitist, incapable of boosting large-scale mobilization or fostering more active citizens.

Finally, the most important finding of this analysis is that not all Eastern Europeans behave in the same manner, at the same time and in a continuous way. Parties vary in shape and in size, they serve many different purposes, and they have different views on conventional participation.

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Acknowledgments

We are particularly grateful to two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

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