

# Party dynamics and leadership longevity: experience from Western Balkans and Visegrad Group countries

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## Abstract

This article is examining the effects of party dynamics on changeability of party leaders, arguing that significant differences can be expected with regard to ideology, parliamentary strength, and involvement in government. Authors claim that leaders are more prone to change, when their parties lose elections or depart from the government. Moreover, they explore variations in leadership longevity in relation to degree of democratic consolidation, based on the analysis of experience from the Western Balkans and Visegrad Group countries. Findings confirm the hypotheses regarding electoral failure and departure from government, as well as regional differences between transitional and more consolidated democracies.

**Keywords:** leaders, leadership longevity, political parties, Visegrad Group, Western Balkans, transitional democracy, consolidated democracy.

## Dynamika partii i długość sprawowania przywództwa: doświadczenia z Bałkanów Zachodnich i krajów Grupy Wyszehradzkiej

### Streszczenie

W artykule przeanalizowano wpływ dynamiki partii na zmienność liderów partii, argumentując, że można spodziewać się znacznych różnic w zakresie ideologii, siły parlamentu i zaangażowania w rządzenie. Autorzy twierdzą, że liderzy są bardziej skłonni do zmian, gdy ich partie przegrywają wybory lub odchodzą od rządu. Ponadto zbadano różnice w długości sprawowania przywództwa w odniesieniu do stopnia demokratycznej konsolidacji, na podstawie analizy doświadczeń z Bałkanów Zachodnich i krajów Grupy Wyszehradzkiej. Wyniki potwierdzają hipotezy dotyczące porażki wyborczej i odejścia od rządu, a także regionalnych różnic między demokracjami przejściowymi i bardziej skonsolidowanymi.

**Stowa kluczowe:** liderzy, długość sprawowania przywództwa, partie polityczne, Grupa Wyszehradzka, Bałkany Zachodnie, demokracja przejściowa, demokracja skonsolidowana.

Modern political parties are often characterised by strong and popular leaders. Personalization of politics is the process, in which key individual political actors become more prominent at the expense of collective identities in political arena (Karvonen 2010: p.4). Trend of personal concentration of power, even in democracies, is observed many times before, mostly with executive dominance of leaders who accumulate commanding authority in making key political and personnel decisions, exercising power over party and subsequently the government (Cross, Blais 2012a: p. 1). Leaders supervise, and more often directly control selection of candidates who represent the party in legislative elections, play a key role in drafting party manifestoes, guide party general direction and, when in government, negotiate coalitions and handpick ministers. Moreover, in most political systems, heads of major parties are main contenders for prime-ministerial or presidential positions (Pilet, Cross 2014: p. 222). Intra-party democracy is under the growing influence of party presidents, with certain authors noting the shift in power from internal bodies towards the party heads (Poguntke, Webb 2005: p. 9–11; von dem Berge et al. 2013: p. 10). Although parties continue to nominally occupy a central role of politics, their support growingly depends on leader's public image and popularity among the voters. This is especially the case if we consider the decline of societal links between voters and parties, which is based on theory of social cleavages (Lipset, Rokkan 1967). It is caused by several factors, including general collapse of traditional classes and mobilisation of party support among them, leading to the rapid transition of political parties from broad collective movements of large social groups, to more personalised organisations (Musella 2018). These processes strengthen the position of party leaders, including their perceived irreplaceability.

There are only a handful of systematic papers analysing leadership longevity. Several connected studies deal with a topic of survival of political actors, as well as institutional mechanisms concerning leadership selection – especially the democratisation of leadership selection – in context of durability (Cross, Blais 2012b). Some of them examined arguments regarding lengths of ministerial tenures, linking them to personal and political characteristics of ministers, as well as systemic traits such as regime type, parliamentary rules, party systems (see: Berlinski et al. 2007; Fischer et al. 2012). Other studies analysed political factors, such as performance, coalition dynamics, and ideological diversity of the coalition (see: Flores 2009; Huber, Martinez-Gallardo 2008, Warwick, 1992), but mostly dealt with effects on cabinet positions. An important study (Bynander, Hart 2007) demonstrated a strong correlation between electoral results and longevity of leaders, especially for opposition parties. The findings are further supported by Andrews and Jackman (2008), analysing long term leadership trends in five democracies, and confirming strong positive correlation between electoral performance and leadership longevity. Examining the case of Austrian party system, Ennser-Jedenastik and Müller (2013) found that electoral

performance has an effect on leadership change, while previous government participation has no significant impact.

There are many factors that can be taken into consideration, when examining influences over leadership durability, including seat share, participation in government, concept of time, party organisation, size of the electorate, predecessors' longevity, personal characteristics, party size and ideology, as well as party age (van Dijk 2013). In our study, we have selected several potential predictors, some of which have been tested before. They include general party ideology (left-right, as well as moderate-extremist), participation in government (single party or coalition), fall from office, electoral failure, strength of the party. Introducing a level of consolidation of democracy represents a novelty in this type of analysis, arguing there are differences in frequency of leadership shifts regarding the level of democratic consolidation, assuming that parties in democracies tend to have more intra-party democracy as well as more developed accountability mechanisms. Systematic analysis of leadership traits, especially changeability or longevity, has never been performed with regard to the Western Balkans countries. A specific phenomenon for post-communist party systems is that through their emergence and role during the transition period, parties are mostly leader-centered. They are formed by the leader and his close friends and allies, who acquire great power in the process (Karasimeonov 2005: p. 104-105; von dem Berge et al. 2013: p. 10-11; King 2002; Cabada, Tomšić 2016).

We, thus, expect more change-resisting leaders in less consolidated democracies of the Western Balkans, in comparison to the more established post-socialist democracies of Central Europe. Simply put, the latter group started their transition earlier and completed it sooner, entering the EU in 2004. Moreover, Freedom House suggests that level of democracy in most of these countries is higher than Western Balkans: average score for Visegrad Group is 84.75, while the selected Western Balkans quartet stands at 71.25 (Freedom House 2018). We aim to examine a possible correlation between democratic consolidation and changeability of party leaders, in context of similar post-socialist democracies.

But before that, we will examine the effects of explanatory variables observable on meso-level, especially party dynamics and characteristics: electoral successes and failures, party strength, involvement in government, and party ideology. Complementary to that, we will also examine a noticeable trend of ousted party leaders forming new political organizations, with regard to the abovementioned (regional) macro- and meso-level variables.

## Methodology

In order to test and subsequently demonstrate the validity of proposed arguments, we have constructed several groups of hypotheses. First of them concerns with the factors affecting the general data indicating longevity and changeability: an average duration of leadership and absolute number of leadership changes for each party in the sample. Hence, the first group of hypotheses presumes that significant differences in

the outcomes regarding length of terms and number of changes can be expected with regard to:

- party ideology, especially between left and right parties, and, moreover, between moderate and extremist ideologies;
- parliamentary strength, between dominant and small parties;
- involvement in government, between ruling and opposition parties;
- degree of democratic consolidation.

Second group of hypotheses is examining the specific leadership changes, testing the potential causes of this phenomenon. For that purpose, the exact observations of leadership changes across the eight country sample have been mapped and correlated with explanatory factors such as ideology, parliamentary strength, ruling status, and degree of consolidation of democracy. Additional variables, concerning the fall from office and electoral failure, are also tested, as their potential impact on replacement of party leaders is objectively presumed.

Finally, third group of hypotheses assumes that dismissed leaders tend to establish new political parties. In order to examine this claim, we will correlate the observations, in which this trend occurred with the abovementioned variety of factors.

The research is comparative and longitudinal in its setting, with the sample comprising of total eight countries over the 18 year period (2000–2018). Observations are derived from two groups of countries of similar societal and political context: Visegrad Group (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, and Slovakia) and selected Western Balkans countries (Croatia, Macedonia, Albania, and Serbia). Although the level of democratic consolidation in these countries is quite different (Merkel 2011), they share similar political history and especially transitional context. Moreover, while all eight are EU members or EU candidate countries, they also share similar institutional framework – all of them are parliamentary republics who use PR list, or, in cases of Hungary and until 2008, Albania, mixed-member electoral system. Visegrad and Western Balkans groups have been selected for comparison in order to emphasise and furthermore test the difference between mostly stable post-transitional democracies who became EU members more than a decade ago (Visegrad Group), and Balkans states who are still in the process of democratic consolidation and EU accession. One exception to the second group is Croatia, which is, although an EU member since 2013, classified within the Western Balkans group because of its political background. In the year 2000, selected as a starting point of the research, four Central European countries have already started their accession negotiations with the EU, while democratisation in the Balkans had its upstart – with the events such as the toppling of Milošević regime in Serbia, death of increasingly authoritarian Croatian president Franjo Tuđman, and stabilisation of governance in Albania following the 1997 civil disorder.

Within this framework, we have employed the following criteria in order to create a sample: all parties controlling at least 5 percent of parliament members in one electoral cycle, or at least 2 percent of parliament members over two distinctive electoral cycles are considered to be relevant and are thus included in the data panel (based on:

Ware 1996: p. 162; Klingemann 1996: p. 381; Siaroff 2000: p. 69; Sartori 1976: p. 121–125). As a result, we have identified a total of 88 relevant political parties (see: Table 1). Moreover, we have identified every leadership change within these 88 parties since the year 2000, including resignations and retirements, but excluding leaders' deaths: there are 137 cases of change at the party top. Furthermore, these changes have been mapped as a part of the wider group of observations, which included every year for every party in the sample from the year 2000 (or from the founding year of the party) to 2018 (or to the date of dissolution), with the differentiating factor being the occurrence of leadership change in a single year. Total size of the sample therefore rose to 1207 observations. Eventually, we have extracted the years, in which ousted leaders formed new parties. There are exactly 14 such cases in the whole panel, which could be too small of a sample to establish any firm conclusion.

**Table 1: Relevant parties sample, 2000–2018**

Country	Number of parties
Poland	11
Hungary	8
Czech Republic	11
Slovakia	15
Albania	6
Macedonia	10
Croatia	11
Serbia	16
Visegrad Group	45
Western Balkans	43
<b>Total</b>	<b>88</b>

Source: own research.

As stated before, there are several dependent variables in our research. Average longevity is defined as an average length of term of each party leader, since its founding and until 2018. Supplementary variable is defined as the term length of longest-serving leader for each party. "Number of changes" variable is expressed in absolute numbers, as a total number of leadership changes within each party, excluding natural causes, i.e. deaths. Next dependent variable is the event of change, defined as dichotomous variable in which the value 0 represents a year without leadership replacement, and value 1 indicates a change. It is worth mentioning that not a single party in the sample experienced two changes in one year. Final dependent variable is derived from the previous one, and it includes those events in which dismissed leaders established new parties, also expressed as dichotomous (values 0 or 1).

Explanatory variable of party ideology is expressed as a categorical variable on a single-dimensional left-right scale, ranging from 1 (extreme left) to 5 (extreme right). These values are assigned based on the results of parties in the Manifesto Project Database (Lehmann et al., 2018). Party strength is defined as a percentage of parliament under its control in every single electoral cycle, categorised in three groups: weak (less than 5 percent), medium (5 to 25 percent), and strong (more than 25 percent of MPs). Other dichotomous variables include the involvement in government and loss of office, which are both defined with 0 or 1 value, and will primarily serve to examine the correlation of these factors with the event of leadership change. Finally, the loss of office is further extended into the electoral failure variable, which is defined as one of the following outcomes for a party in the elections: decrease of seats by at least 10 percent (excluding the cases in which the dominant ruling party retained its position); fall from the government; inability of an ex-ruling party to regain place in government over two electoral cycles; loss of all seats; the inability to gain any seats. Apart from Manifesto Project, other variables are constructed based on the information retrieved from four specific databases (Döring, Manow 2018; Casal Bertoá 2018; Berglund et al. 2013; Woldendorp et al. 2011). Final explanatory variables are concerned with regional differences, not just between eight countries in the sample, but also between Visegrad Group and Western Balkans as a whole.

## Research results

Initial descriptive analysis of first, more general group of dependent variables has indicated certain differences within the sample, most evidently between Visegrad and Western Balkans group, indicating that country variable could be an important explanatory factor (see: Table 2). In Visegrad Group (V4), leaders averagely spend 5.3 years at party helms, while that number is significantly higher in the Balkans, standing at 9.6 years on average. The difference would be even more drastic, but the Visegrad average is mitigated by the observations from Slovakia, where leaders of key parties tend to stay in position for decades (for example, Vladimír Mečiar led his party for 22 years, Robert Fico – 19 years, Mikuláš Dzurinda – 14 years). Moreover, when comes to comparison of longest serving leaders, the difference is almost five years, with 13.9 on average in the Western Balkans compared to Visegrad Group's 8.9. Disparity is emphasised in Serbia and Albania, where several leaders have held their positions ever since the renewal of multiparty system. In total, Visegrad party systems had almost twice the leadership changes per party than the Western Balkans. This result has been facilitated not just by the emergence of a certain amount of relevant new parties in Slovakia (and, to lesser extent in Czech Republic and Poland, which are founded recently and did not underwent the leadership replacement process yet), but also by a relatively high number of changes recorded in Croatia, especially in smaller parties.

**Table 2: Longevity and changeability by country**

Country	Average longevity (years)	Longest serving leader average (years)	Leadership changes per party
Poland	4.7	8.8	2
Hungary	4.7	10.8	2.9
Czech Republic	3.7	6.3	2.6
Slovakia	8.2	9.7	0.9
Albania	10.3	16.2	0.7
Macedonia	8.8	12.7	1.6
Croatia	7	12.5	1.9
Serbia	12.2	14.1	0.6
Average V4	5.3	8.9	2.1
Average WB	9.6	13.9	1.2

Source: own research.

Other presumed trends are less evident. Ideology variable displays certain indications that center parties are more prone to changes and hence, reduced levels of longevity (see: Table 3). There is no significant difference between moderate and extremist (far left or far right) parties when comes to longevity, but extremists are far less prone to leadership changes: 0.7 events of change on average, compared to 1.8 in moderate left, moderate right, or center parties. Moreover, propensity towards change declines with the rising strength of a party, which is an expected outcome: 43.8 percent of changes happened in parties we defined as weak (controlling less than 5 percent of parliament), while only 21.2 percent occurred in strong parties (controlling more than a quarter of seats). However, we should note that strength and ruling status are not the guarantee of leader's survival, bearing in mind that in 40 cases (29.2 percent of total sample) party chiefs lost their position while their respective parties participated in government.

**Table 3: Longevity and changeability by overall ideology**

Party ideology	Number of parties	Average longevity (years)	Longest serving leader average (years)	Leadership changes per party
Far left	6	7	11.2	0.5
Moderate left	20	9	13.7	1.9
Center	21	5.5	7.9	2.1
Moderate right	30	8.3	12	1.5
Far right	11	8	10.6	0.8

Source: own research.

Correlation-based tests of above mentioned variables have confirmed associations between certain variables, most notably the ones related to the regional or country group component. Both demonstrated very strong coefficients, when comes to the average length of term and longest serving leader variables, as well as number of changes. Tests of other potential explanators did not result in statistically significant outcomes, so it seems that regional component represents the factor with strongest effect on both durability and changeability of party leadership. However, further causality models employed on these variables did not validate these results, although the regional and country variables demonstrated values close to statistical significance, leaving this theory at the level of association, rather than causation.

Second group of tests is performed with regard to the event of change variable, which is correlated with a number of potential explanations. Non-existent or very weak correlation is detected in relation to the factors of ruling status or involvement in government, party strength, country or region, and ideology, both in left-right and extremist-moderate classification. Only moderate level of association is detected between leadership change and occurrence of fall from power, while the electoral failure seems to have the strongest association. Binomial logistics tests confirm these results: in case of electoral failure of a party, there is 6.52 times more chance for leadership replacement (see: Table 4). In connection with that, the change at the helm is 3.49 times more certain in those parties, which lose their place with the ruling majority. Moderate parties also tend to be slightly more prone to changes, suggesting that leaders in extremist parties incline to be more authoritarian.

**Table 4: Variables affecting the leadership changes**

(constant)	.257*
ruling party	1.228
fall from office	3.487**
strength of party	1.002
electoral failure	6.520**
country	.834*
region	.805
ideology (left or right)	.958
ideology (moderate or extremist)	.354**
dependent variable: event of change	

\*p < 0.1. \*\* p < 0.05.

Source: own research.

We have further tested the specific electoral failure variable, which remained strongest explanation across ideologies and party sizes. There are however some regional differences. In Visegrad region, leaders are 5.05 times more prone to replacement after

losses, with the specific fall from government effect coming as close second potential explanation (4.54). On the other hand, the responsibility for the government seat loss is not statistically significant in the Balkans, but there is 9.01 times more chance for leaders to get replaced after electoral failure in this region. The finding implies a surprising amount of perceived responsibility for electoral losses in the Western Balkans. The most staggering case is Serbia, where leaders whose parties underachieve in parliamentary elections are 27.48 times more prone to replacement, standing in contrast with descriptive data on longevity and changeability, which ranked Serbia poorly compared to the rest of countries in the sample.

In total, 43.8 percent of identified leadership changes across the whole sample happened after the electoral failure. However, we should underline that leaders are replaced, even when there was no apparent underachievement in the elections, which happened in 56.2 percent of cases. We should also notice that 60 percent of electoral failures did not cause a shift in party leadership, irrespective of the country, ideology or any other additional factor.

Finally, testing of third group of hypotheses is limited to cases of ousted leaders who decided to establish new political parties. In our sample, their number is relatively small, amounting to only 14 cases, meaning that 10.2 percent of replaced leaders have seceded and formed new organizations, irrespective of organization's strength or relevance. Correlation of these occurrences with previously defined set of explanatory variables did not provide significant results, so the modest number of observations in the sample proved to be insufficient for producing viable conclusions. Ten out of mentioned 14 cases happened in Visegrad Group countries, while only four occurred in Western Balkans. The secession of ousted leader never happened in far left parties, in contrast with center parties, who saw it five times. In nine out of 14 cases, it happened after leadership change which followed the electoral failure and in eight of them after fall of the party from government – indicating that former government members might have amassed certain popularity and resources, which could give them confidence to form separate organizations even if they lose support and legitimacy within their own parties.

## Conclusions

The panel of 88 parties across 18 years and 8 countries demonstrated significant variations in examined outcomes between Central European and Balkans region. Average duration of the term is significantly lower in the Visegrad Group. Comparing the average term of the longest leaders in these two groups, we found a similar result, with the difference of almost five years between regions, indicating that Balkans leaders tend to remain at the head of their parties for longer periods. This is also supported by the analysis of average number of leadership changes. Ideology variable displays certain indications that center parties are more prone to changes and hence, reduced levels of longevity. There is no difference between moderate and extremist (far left or far right) parties, when comes to longevity, but extremists are generally less prone to leadership changes.

Moreover, propensity towards change declines with the rising strength of a party, which is an expected outcome. We have also noted that strength and ruling status are not the guarantee of leader's survival. Changes in leadership are most likely to happen after the electoral failure of the party, including the loss of office, inability to regain the place in government, significant decrease or loss of all parliamentary seats. In this component, Balkans countries fare better than Visegrad Group, displaying greater chance for leaders to be held responsible after electoral losses.

The main conclusion of our research is that there is a strong influence of the regional component on the longevity of the leader. It seems this variable, which is abstracted as an indicator of different levels of democratic consolidation, represents the factor with strongest effect on both longevity and changeability of party leadership. When comes to occurrence of leadership change, electoral failure and fall from office are most important predictors: loses of popularity are significantly limiting the capacities of party heads to survive at their posts.

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