

DOI: 10.20542/0131-2227-2022-66-12-16-26

## FRAGMENTATION OF EUROPEAN PARTY SYSTEMS: PREREQUISITES, SCENARIOS, SEQUENCES

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Received 01.07.2022. Revised 01.08.2022. Accepted 29.09.2022.

**Abstract.** The article explores the process of fragmentation of political party systems in 25 member countries of the European Union during the last three decades (since 1990s). The analysis starts with discussion on prerequisites of fragmentation through the theoretical lens of the works of S. Lipset/S. Rokkan and A. Lijphart. The main prerequisite is accretion of the system of cleavages in the societies in post-materialist age. Other – secondary – reasons include effects of proportional electoral systems, the rise of populism, volatility of party systems in post-communist countries. Further, the article presents the results of analysis of the Effective Number of Parliamentary Parties (ENPP) dynamics in all national elections since 1990; the average ENPP rose from 4.2 to 6.1. Though scenarios of the rise are similar in many respects (i.e., the simultaneous rise in the first elections after 2008–2009 economic crisis), certain distinctions can be found between “old” and “new” countries, systems of moderate and extreme pluralism. The concluding sub-chapter briefly discusses the “pros” and “cons” of party systems fragmentation for the European countries’ politics, which is considered irreversible because it is based on an accreted constellation of cleavages. On the one hand, more fragmented party systems provide for more nuanced representation of societal interests, and are, therefore, democratic and objective. On the other, it gives voice to illiberal populism and complicates the process of coalition building to form the executive; and, in addition, more plural executives tend to be volatile. Recent European political history presents plentiful examples of both. The ultimate challenge for European politicians is to learn to take advantage of the “pros” and tackle the “cons”.

**Keywords:** political parties, party systems, elections, populism, post-communist countries, European Union.

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## ФРАГМЕНТАЦИЯ ЕВРОПЕЙСКИХ ПАРТИЙНЫХ СИСТЕМ: ПРИЧИНЫ, СЦЕНАРИИ, СЛЕДСТВИЯ

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Статья поступила 01.07.2022. После доработки 01.08.2022. Принята к печати 29.09.2022.

**Аннотация.** В статье анализируется процесс фрагментации партийных систем 25 стран – членов Европейского союза за последние три десятилетия. Разбираются причины такого тренда: появление новых значимых общественно-политических размежеваний, подъем популизма, волатильность партийных систем посткоммунистических стран. На основании анализа эффективного числа парламентских партий на всех общенациональных выборах с 1990 г. установлен рост этого показателя с 4.2 до 6.1. Выделены общие черты сценариев фрагментации для всех стран выборки, и разобраны особенности этого процесса в четырех подгруппах стран. В заключительном разделе разбираются последствия фрагментации партийных систем для европейской политики.

**Ключевые слова:** политические партии, партийные системы, выборы, популизм, посткоммунистические страны, Европейский союз.

Studies dealing with current processes in the political parties of Western countries are rather numerous. However, the vast majority of them focus on the

qualitative characteristics of the processes, while the “quantitative” aspects, such as the number of parties actually participating in political competition, are at

best a collateral issue. This paper aims to fill this gap, at least partially.

The still relevant theoretical basis of knowledge about the number of parties in a party system is the concept of salient socio-political cleavages by Lipset and Rokkan [1]. Lijphart in his equally well-known classical work [2] in the last decade of the 20th century provided an expert calculation of the number of such cleavages for 36 democratic states that existed at that time and applied the formula, which was first developed by Taagapera and Grofman [3]. According to this formula, to ensure that parties represent all the cleavages that are salient for a given polity, their effective number must be one more than the number of such cleavages in this polity. It should be noted that this indicator, also developed by Taagapera together with Laakso<sup>1</sup> [4], takes into account the effective number of parliamentary parties (ENPP), that is, those that win seats in parliaments and therefore play a role in the politics of their country. This logic is coherent with the approach that underlies different, but similar in terms of their conceptual grounds, typologies of party systems by Sartori [5] and Blondel [6].

According to Lijphart's calculation in the above-mentioned work, the correlation coefficient between the ENPP indicator and the number of crucial cleavages in the countries of his sample turned out to be very high – 0.84 [2, pp. 87-88]. A decade and a half later, a similar calculation, but for a different sample of countries, was repeated in the research project of the Higher School of Economics dealing with a comparative analysis of party systems. For mature democracies (there were 14 of them in the sample), the correlation indicator remained significant but decreased (0.68). However, this formula did not work on the subsample of post-communist states: transitional party systems are either characterized by excessive fragmentation, not driven by objective circumstances, or, on the contrary, are subject to the dominance of one party, and thus do not express the pluralism of public interests through political parties [7, pp. 63-64].

Lijphart's calculations show that in the period after World War II, the ENPP in most countries was fairly stable or moderately growing (the reverse trend was rare) [2, pp. 74-77]. However, since the last

<sup>1</sup> This indicator is calculated according to the formula  $N_{LT} = 1 / \sum_{i=1}^n p_i^2$  where  $N_{LT}$  is the indicator of the effective number of parties according to Laakso and Taagepera;  $p_i^2$  is the share of seats in the parliament of the  $i$ -th party, squared;  $n$  is the total number of parties participating in the elections or sitting in the parliament.

decade of the 20th century, a clear trend toward the fragmentation of European party systems has been observed. This phenomenon needs a description and analysis of its causes, scenarios, and consequences for party systems, more broadly, for the institution of representation of significant public interests.

## COMPLICATION OF THE SYSTEM OF CLEAVAGES

We can identify one main reason for the fragmentation of European party systems in recent decades and several consequences of this fragmentation, which can be seen as separate, albeit secondary, causes. The main reason certainly is the qualitative complication of the system of salient socio-political cleavages.

The changes that followed in Western societies as a result of the post-war economic recovery and the construction of the *welfare state* gave rise to the realities of the world that came to be called “post-industrial” or “post-materialistic”. The traditional political agenda was supplemented by issues, which split societies on new – and multiple – grounds. In the earlier stage (in the 1970s-1990s), the political agenda expanded under the influence of the “beneficiaries” of the wave of economic successes of the post-war decades – the urban middle class: a clean environment, safe use of nuclear energy, advanced culture, equal status for women and minorities, and expanded moral norms, especially in the sphere of family and sexual relations.

The traditional cleavages on which the ideologies of political parties were based were gradually losing their significance: at this point, researchers believed that parties were losing their role. The classical work *The Crisis of Democracy* noted that “a movement... into a post-industrial phase hence means the end of the political party systems we have known it” and it will redefine the very institution of political participation” [8, p. 91].

In the later period – since the beginning of the 21st century – the income growth of the population (including the middle class), in the developed Western countries, slowed down significantly. Then, the global economic crisis of 2008–2009 followed, and in the subsequent years, Europe experienced a powerful flow of immigration from the Third World (its peak occurred in 2015–2016). Under the influence of these processes, the political agenda expanded due to the anxieties and fears of the “losers” or those who were “afraid of losing” in the context of the globalization,

namely, of the conservative layers of the lower middle class and blue-collar workers who were losing their jobs.

These changes did not abolish the “old” cleavages, although their sharpness either almost completely faded into history (such as the religious-secular or urban-rural confrontation) or significantly softened, as happened with the main cleavage throughout most of the 20th century – the socioeconomic one. From an almost existential class conflict between labor and capital, it turned into a permanent bargain between the “right” and “left” for the redistribution of resources. The new cleavages layered on top of the old ones, that is, their accretion occurred – according to the formulation of an authoritative study of new cleavages [9, p. 30]. The new cleavages themselves are numerous. Among the most significant, one should note the environmental, “transnational”, which “packs up” controversies about globalization and Euro-integration, and the adjacent, but still special set of problems associated with the influx of immigrants. Threats to the traditional identity of European countries and fears that immigrants will become competitors for jobs and social benefits have intertwined here.

Attempts to systematize the new system of cleavages – in order to analyze their impact on the evolution of party systems – have been made many times. Kitschelt suggested introducing a two-level system: fundamental *cleavages* and situational *divides* and the degree of their significance for inter-party competition: low – for ideological confrontations in the public consciousness, medium – for persistent party confrontations, and high – for competition considerations in a specific political situation [10, p. 532]. In the essence, this is an attempt to instrumentalize what in earlier approaches was determined by expertise: the degree of significance of a certain cleavage for competition in the socio-political field and, consequently, for elections with the participation of a certain number of parties.

However, the present study is primarily interested, not in the classification of new cleavages, but in their influence on the quantitative measurement of party systems. The logic of Lipset and Rokkan’s theory implies that with the emergence of a new cleavage, with a certain lag (equal to a generation, as these authors specify [1]), a new party should also emerge, for which this cleavage will be a priority of the political agenda. In reality, this process is complicated. On the one hand, the entry of a new party into the arena of political competition is restricted by barriers, both institutional (the electoral system, in most cases set-

ting a “threshold for the entry” into the parliament, in European conditions – in the range of 3–5% of votes) and political: incumbent parties have high recognizability, stable electoral cores, party organizations, and resources. On the other hand, the “old” parties, due to “program inertia” (fear of losing voters accustomed to their programs), as well as obligations generated by their activity in governments and parliaments, are to a large extent rigid [11, p. 20]; it is hard for them to perceive ideas that are not in line with their programs. The problem in each specific case is solved by a kind of “game of supply and demand” [10, p. 539; 12]. If a new problem becomes important for a significant part of voters (“demand”), and the existing parties are unwilling or unable to respond to this demand in their program, then a niche opens up for a new party (“supply”).

#### THE EFFECT OF ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

One more factor in centripetal tendencies (statistical rather than substantive) is that new democratizing states in most cases adopt proportional or mixed electoral systems. This is a general trend for modern transitions to democracy, or at least to competitive elections [13, pp. 394–397]. It is also observed in the post-communist space (except for Belarus and some Central Asian countries). Proportional systems came into use only in the 20th century, for the first time in 1899 in Belgium [14, p. 66]. Gradually, they gained recognition as more accurately reflecting the whole spectrum of opinions existing in society through the system of party representation in parliaments.

The proportional electoral system with a moderate cut-off barrier allows a party that gains the support of a few percent of active voters to get representation in parliament, and, under favorable conditions, to claim a place in the ruling coalition. It should be noted that in recent decades, even the majoritarian first-past-the-post electoral system of Great Britain has actually become multi-party: the process of devolution, which gave autonomy to Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales, resulted in the appearance of segmental parties of these territories in the House of Commons. The French party system has also retained its pluralism: in the first round, voters cast their votes for multiple parties according to their ideological preferences, while in the second round, they vote “strategically” for a passing candidate.

One can conclude that in modern conditions, proportional (and mixed) electoral systems in the overwhelming majority of European countries are

institutionally favorable to the fragmentation of party systems, while the few majoritarian systems do not prevent it.

#### POST-COMMUNIST PARTY SYSTEMS: FRAGMENTATION AND VOLATILITY

Political competition and multi-party systems have existed in post-communist states since the early 1990s. The model of their formation based on socio-political cleavages did not work in the new systems: during the decades of the communist regime, no cleavages objectively existing in society could manifest themselves in legal public politics. The multi-party system emerged before any stable interest groups could be formed in society. If one returns to the allusion to the formation of party systems as a balance of supply and demand, then the classical party system is a “buyer’s market”: public interests demand their expression, and politicians compete for the support of their “supply” by the masses of voters. In an undifferentiated socio-political space, competition is born as a “seller’s market”: those political forces that assert themselves most loudly and persuasively receive the maximum electoral support. Besides, in the first decade, there was a specific cleavage in these countries – with respect to the former Communist regime, which separated the old and new elites [7, pp. 108-110). Currently, remnants of this cleavage can be found in Latvia, Lithuania, and, to a lesser extent, in the Visegrad Four countries. In a number of post-communist countries (Romania, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, and Slovakia), segmental parties of ethnic minorities have emerged.

It is evident that such a situation is fraught with strong volatility in party systems. In the 1990s, it seemed that the excessive pluralism of the first electoral cycles would be replaced by a rational party system, in which large parties would stand out. Herbert Kitschelt, a researcher of post-communist party systems, distinguished among them “programmatically” systems (with some reservations, center-right- and center-left groups familiar to “old” Europe), “charismatic” (leadership) and “clientelist”, predicting that the first of them would become large nuclei of the future party system [12]. However, for reasons beyond the scope of the present research, programmatic parties have not become dominant almost anywhere. The party space is filled with leadership, clientelist, and populist parties, and high volatility persists. All these features of political development stimulated the fragmentation of party systems.

#### ANTY-MONOPOLY EFFECT

This title is suggested by the term “cartel parties”, introduced back in the 1960s by Otto Kirchheimer [15, pp. 177-200] to describe the process of parties’ “merging” with the state apparatus and separation from the electorate. One of the main points of this concept is that large parties in Western countries replace each other “at the helm of power”, heading governments (on their own or in coalition with junior partners) and caring little about the aspirations of their voters. It is often argued that voters “punish” the ruling parties for unsuccessful socioeconomic policies. However, studies show that in a relatively stable socioeconomic situation, the correlation between socioeconomic indicators and voting against the ruling party is weak [16, pp. 147-172]. However, the large-scale economic crisis of 2008–2009 and the peak of immigration to Europe in 2015–2016 caused a vigorous anti-government reaction from European voters. In the first elections since the crisis, ruling parties were defeated in 21 out of 25 countries included in the sample of the empirical study described below. It is important that voters “punished” both center-left and center-right parties: in integrated Europe, national governments vary their socioeconomic policies only to a limited extent, therefore voters considered any ruling party “guilty”.

European voters of the 21st century, on the one hand, have more claims to the state due to the stagnation of the economy, incomes, and the crisis of the welfare state. On the other hand, they are much more involved in the information and communication space due to the Internet and social networks, and therefore are more decisive in their electoral actions, directing them against those whom they see as the culprit of their failures – large centrist parties that form governments.

In the most recent elections of the European Parliament in 2019, the representation of the two largest European parties – the People’s Party (Christian Democrats) and the Social Democrats – decreased by 5 and 4 percentage points, respectively [17, p. 23]. They were displaced by new political forces, which resulted in a fragmentation of party systems in many countries.

#### ADDING A POPULIST DIMENSION

Among the “new players” in party systems, populist parties and movements attract the most attention of researchers. Populism, according to the most famous definition by Mudde, is an ideology that

considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups: ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’” [18, p. 543]. However, in the same work, Mudde specifies that this ideology is “thin” and in each specific case needs symbiosis with the “host” ideology. It seems more correct to define populism as “a qualitative characteristic of political doctrines, parties, and movements for which the opposition of elites and masses is the central or one of the most important items on the agenda” [19, p. 8]. The “linkage” of the populist message with “host ideologies” takes on peculiar forms. Studies show that in the left wing, a distinguishing feature of populist parties is the focus on class conflict (which has long become archaic for the center-left mainstream), and in the right wing – extreme nativism, up to xenophobia [20, 21]. There are also populist parties that cannot be classified according to the conventional “left-right scale”: this is not “centrist” populism, which would be in the center according to the above-mentioned scale, but “valence” populism, which actually does not have a substantial socioeconomic program, but addresses voters with “polyvalent topics” (struggle against corruption, the efficiency of public administration, etc.) [22] or follows the charismatic figure of the party leader (Beppe Grillo in the Italian Five Star Movement, Andrej Babiš in the Czech ANO<sup>2</sup>).

In terms of the fragmentation of party systems, the impact of populism is manifested in that it creates a kind of “parallel spectrum” of other political forces, duplicating the usual mainstream. Populist parties compete with the mainstream from positions that are definitely antagonistic, sharply polemical, appealing to segments of the electorate disappointed by the inability of the mainstream to answer the questions, the significance of which is rising (the economic crisis and its consequences, the influx of migrants, etc.) [10, p. 539; 23, pp. 347-360]. They are “riding a new wave of anger that liberal democracies have not faced in half a century” [24]. While at the turn of the century, populist parties had parliamentary representation in seven European countries, with an average of 8%, by 2018 (the peak of the impact of populism in Europe) – in already 15 countries, witnessed an average share of 26% of seats [25].

One should note one more feature of populist parties stimulating the fragmentation of party systems – the instability of their results. Having achieved success in elections (up to joining the ruling coalition, usually in the role of a junior partner, but sometimes

even heading it), populists find themselves unable to fulfill their election promises, built on radical opposition to the establishment [26, pp. 15-16], since there is no real programmatic alternative to this establishment. One of the consequences of this phenomenon is the “doubling of populisms” in the party system, which takes place in bizarre configurations. In a number of countries, left-wing and right-wing populist parties compete, for example, such as Podemos and Vox in Spain, La France Insoumise and Rassemblement Nationale in France (their candidates took 3rd and 2nd places, respectively, in the first round of the 2022 presidential election), SYRIZA and Golden Dawn (now banned by court order) in Greece. In other countries, left-wing populism is absent as a significant political force, and right-wing populism competes either “with itself” (that is, there are at least two right-wing populist parties, for example, the Freedom Party and the Forum for Democracy in the Netherlands, Fidesz and Jobbik in Hungary) or with “valence” populism – the League and the Five Star Movement in Italy, Freedom and Direct Democracy with the Action of Dissatisfied Citizens – ANO 2011 in the Czech Republic.

It should be emphasized that the rise of populism is considered here as one of the consequences of the increasing complexity of the system of socio-political cleavages, but one that has had the maximum impact on the fragmentation of European party systems in recent decades.

## FRAGMENTATION SCENARIOS OF PARTY SYSTEMS

To identify fragmentation scenarios, the ENPP in the 25 European Union member states for all national parliamentary elections from 1990 to 2021 was calculated<sup>3</sup>. The results of these calculations are shown in the table and figure below.

The calculations showed that the average ENPP for all countries in the sample grew by almost 2 units over this period: from 4.2 to 6.1, which is a very significant increase. In the logic of Lijphart’s theory, it is a natural phenomenon: if the system of cleavages becomes more complicated and includes new elements, the growth of the ENPP by 1–2 units can be expected. One should note two features of this process, which are characteristic of almost the entire sample. First, the fragmenting tendency manifested itself in

<sup>2</sup> ANO (Czech) – Akce nespokojených občanů (Action of Dissatisfied Citizens).

<sup>3</sup> The data were calculated based on the Marpor database. *Project Manifesto*. Available at: <https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu/> (accessed June 12, 2022). The indicator is calculated based on the number of mandates in the parliament.

**Table.** Dynamics of the effective number of parliamentary parties in 1990–2021

	“Old” Europe, moderate pluralism	“Old” Europe, extreme pluralism	Post-Communist Europe, moderate pluralism	Post-Communist Europe, extreme pluralism	All Europe
1990	3.30	4.48	4.67	5.08	4.24
1991	3.23	5.63	7.40	5.21	5.06
1992	3.27	5.97	8.78	5.67	5.64
1993	3.19	6.37	7.92	5.78	5.57
1994	3.29	6.68	7.58	5.92	5.61
1995	3.27	6.58	6.88	6.52	5.58
1996	3.31	6.62	6.42	6.63	5.54
1997	3.34	6.60	5.08	6.48	5.24
1998	3.36	6.52	4.72	5.92	5.05
1999	3.40	6.63	4.90	5.92	5.13
2000	3.30	6.63	4.96	5.28	4.96
2001	3.31	6.50	4.96	5.45	4.97
2002	3.19	6.38	4.68	6.07	5.00
2003	3.19	5.97	4.64	6.07	4.89
2004	3.19	5.97	4.64	5.97	4.87
2005	3.34	6.03	4.90	6.00	4.99
2006	3.44	5.63	4.60	5.63	4.78
2007	3.44	5.80	3.78	5.63	4.65
2008	3.57	5.92	3.78	6.08	4.82
2009	3.83	5.92	3.78	6.12	4.90
2010	3.84	6.12	4.30	5.57	4.93
2011	3.96	6.25	4.36	5.80	5.06
2012	3.97	6.23	4.36	4.95	4.86
2013	3.91	6.48	4.52	5.13	4.98
2014	3.91	6.98	4.82	5.23	5.21
2015	4.19	7.02	5.06	5.23	5.34
2016	4.33	7.02	5.02	5.83	5.52
2017	4.20	7.72	4.88	5.70	5.59
2018	4.20	7.70	4.86	6.67	5.82
2019	4.69	8.12	4.54	6.67	6.00
2020	4.63	8.12	4.61	7.17	6.12
2021	4.73	8.23	4.27	7.36	6.15

Note. Indicators in absolute numbers, calculated by the above formula.

Compiled by the author.

the overwhelming majority of the 25 countries studied and in three of the four subsamples described below in almost equal proportions, approximately by one and a half times. Second, one can identify three reference points when the average European indicator showed an upward trend (as shown in the figure). The first one, explosive in nature, was at the beginning of the 1990s; it was determined by the spread of competitive elections to post-communist countries. The first election cycles involved a large number of parties, and many of them entered the parliament, receiving a small number of mandates. This was a manifestation of “civilizational incompetence” [10] of both party leaders and voters, who were just acquir-

ing ideas about the rational representation of public interests in parliaments. However, this was also the period when the fragmentation of party systems began in some countries of “old” Europe.

The second reference point was the first elections after the economic crisis of 2008–2009 when voters “punished” the ruling parties almost everywhere. It was then that the party systems in both “old” and post-communist Europe began to fragment more actively, and populist parties of various orientations began to gain strength. The third point, in essence, was a continuation of the second – the elections after the “migration tsunami” of 2015–2016. What is meant here is not a “leap”, but a monotonous up-

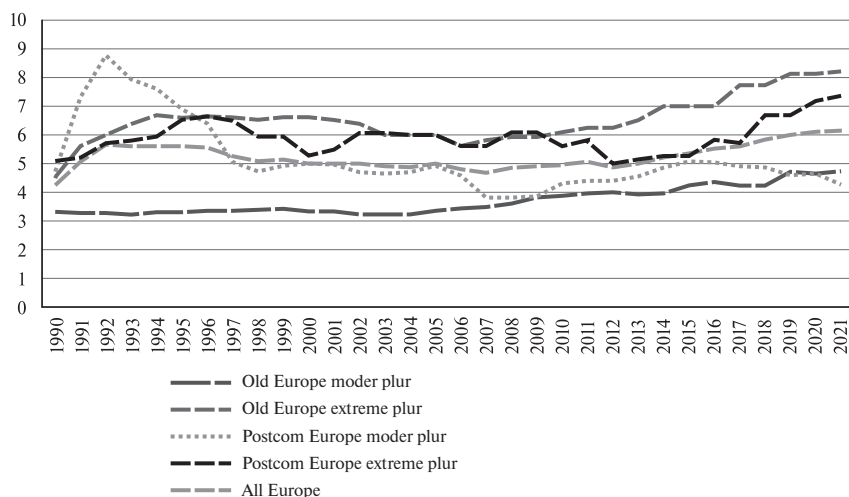


Fig. Dynamics of the effective number of parliamentary parties, 1990–2021

Compiled by the author.

ward trend in all four subsamples. While in the period of 1990–2007, the average ENPP for 25 countries increased by only 0.5, from 2008 to 2021, it gained another 1.4 points, that is, the growth accelerated almost threefold.

For a more detailed analysis, the entire sample was divided into four groups. For “old” Europe (14 countries), the division criterion was the boundary between the party systems, which in Sartori’s classification are referred to as moderate (no more than five parties) and extreme (above five parties) types of pluralism – based on the arithmetic mean of the ENPP for the entire period (3.7 and 6.5, respectively). This sufficiently clear and reasonable criterion was used to form subsamples of eight and six countries.

The breakdown of 11 post-communist countries into two groups followed a somewhat different logic. In many of them, over three decades, centrifugal trends in the development of party systems alternated with centripetal ones. Therefore, the ENPP indicator close to 5<sup>4</sup> (or lower) at the end of the considered period was chosen as a criterion. This made it possible to divide countries in which, as a result of 30 years of development, party systems of moderate and extreme pluralism have developed.

In the countries of “old” Europe with moderate pluralism, the fragmentation of the party system was gradual. The average ENPP value increased over three decades from 3.2 to 4.7; in five of the eight countries, this indicator remained below 5 by 2021, that is, they remained systems of moderate pluralism. The party system of Great Britain turned out to be the most

<sup>4</sup> In two of the five countries in the subsample of moderately pluralistic systems, the EFPP indicator is slightly above 5.

stable (although it became a three-party one) – the majoritarian first-past-the-post election system continues to play the role of an institutional limiter for fragmentation. The party systems of Greece, Portugal, Spain, Austria, and Sweden showed gradual and moderate fragmentation. At the same time, dramatic changes took place in the Greek party system, and one of only two cases of change in the leading center-left party in the entire sample occurred – from the establishment social democratic PASOK to the left-wing populist SYRIZA. Since 2015, the new populist parties have also significantly pushed back the party establishment in Spain (where before a weak downward trend in ENPP was observed). Only in two countries, the fragmentation of party systems was more pronounced. In Germany, the ENPP has increased from 3.2 to 5.8 in 30 years. The once “two-and-a-half-party” (according to Blondel’s typology) system was successively fragmented due to the appearance of the Greens in the Bundestag (the first case in Europe), then a party formed by a left wing that had broken away from the Social Democrats in alliance with the heiress of the ruling party of the former GDR (now The Left), and even later – the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany. In Ireland, the fragmentation is primarily determined by the decline of the Labor Party, whose votes were divided among several small parties.

In the countries of “old” Europe with systems of extreme pluralism, the average ENPP value increased from 5.6 to 8.2. At the same time, it should be noted that “at the start”, in the early 1990s, only two party systems (Belgium and Finland) fell into this category. In most countries of this group, the main “upsurge” occurred in the last five to seven years. So, it can be

assumed that it was caused by the growth of populism of various kinds under the influence of a jump-like increase in immigration. In Denmark, Finland, and the Netherlands, this process was fairly smooth from election to election.

In France, the fragmentation of the party system took place as early as the 1990s, and then during the first 16 years of the 21st century, its defragmentation was underway (the ENPP indicator decreased). Since then, the terms of office of the popularly elected president and parliament have become equal; the elections of these institutions began to be held sequentially with an interval of a couple of months, which obviously stimulated the consolidation of parties. However, the 2017 election cycle led to the collapse of the party system after the presidential candidates from the two major parties – the center-right Republicans and the center-left Socialist Party – suffered a devastating defeat, and literally in the course of the twin campaign, emerged the parties of the winner of the presidential elections Emmanuel Macron and the new leader on the left wing – La France Insoumise headed by Jean-Luc Mélenchon [27]. The result was a sharp jump to the level of 6.9.

In two party systems, the ENPP indicators should be perceived with an understanding of their unique specifics. In Belgium, with a single exception, all major political parties are represented by separate organizations in Flanders and Wallonia. Thus, in fact, the system is “doubled”, which explains the large number of parties. In Italy, where the party system is very fragmented, different political forces are consolidated in coalitions for elections, while some parties participate in elections outside of coalitions. However, there is no doubt that both Belgium and Italy gravitate toward the type of extreme pluralism.

In all post-communist countries of the sample, a general trend can be seen: after the first elections with the participation of a large number of parties since the mid-1990s, the ENPP indicator in most countries gradually decreased – “civilizational competence” was acquired [10]. However, from the second decade of the 21st century, it began to rise: in countries that are now in the zone of extreme pluralism – very sharply, and in moderate countries, there were two different trends.

In the subsample of countries with moderate pluralism – only one of the four examined – the ENPP decreased from 4.67 to 4.27 during the period under study. The reason for this was that in two of the five countries, regimes were established, in which one party has an absolute majority of seats in the par-

liament (which automatically reduces the ENPP). Hungary's Fidesz fully meets the concept of a dominant party: in four consecutive elections since 2010, it received a stable 67–68% of seats. The Polish Law and Justice party does not have such dominance, but since 2015, it has had 51% of the seats in the Sejm (and its representative is also the president of the country). In both countries, during three decades, there was a trend toward less fragmented party systems – these are two exceptions in the entire sample of both “old” and “new” Europe, determined by the rise of right-wing and distinctly Eurosceptic and conservative populism.

In the countries of this subsample, at the trend level, one can note a smooth decrease in the fragmentation of party systems after the “upsurges of multipartyism” in the 1990s. In Estonia, the ENPP has fluctuated around the five-party mark since 2003. In Croatia, the ENPP increased smoothly during the first 17 years of post-communist development, but then decreased and since 2007 has fluctuated in a narrow range from 4 to 4.64. The Czech party system evolved in a different way. From the second half of the 1990s until the economic crisis (the elections of 2010), it was consolidated, but then, with the collapse of the seemingly strong center-right and center-left “cores”, it got fragmented, and for three election cycles in a row, the ENPP fluctuated in the range of 6.9–7.7, and only after the 2021 elections, returned to a more moderate indicator of 5.2.

In the group of post-communist party systems of extreme pluralism, fragmentation also increased significantly: from 5.08 to 7.36. With one exception (Bulgaria), in all these countries, the ENPP exceeded the mark of 5 parties no later than the second round of competitive elections. Many of these countries are characterized by the instability of cabinets and governing coalitions, and, as a rule, after early elections provoked by such instability, the ENPP turned out to be higher than before them. It was the prolonged instability of governments that caused the fragmentation of the Bulgarian political system after 2013. All of these countries are characterized by sharper fluctuations in the ENPP, but there is a common pattern: a sharp spike in fragmentation occurs almost simultaneously in elections after 2016. To identify the reasons for this phenomenon, separate country studies are needed. Obviously, one of them is the “fashion for populism”, which in those years swept almost the entire European continent. Prior to that, extreme pluralism was characteristic only of Lithuania and Latvia, where, in addition to the standard set of cleavages in politics, there were also specific ones associated with



ethnic diversity and a split with respect to the Soviet past. On the contrary, in Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia, the ENPP indicator was gradually declining.

### PARTY SYSTEMS TODAY

Thus, the fragmentation of the European party systems did take place, especially in the last decade and a half. If at the beginning of the period under study, out of 25 countries in the sample, systems of extreme pluralism existed only in five countries (of which three were post-communist at the initial stage of the formation of party systems), now there are 17 of them – more than two-thirds (although in five of them, the ENPP is in the interval from 5 to 6, i.e., this is a kind of intermediate zone). How significant and large-scale is this process?

According to the analysis of the Canadian political scientist Siaroff [28], out of 36 European countries he studied, only two – Belgium and the Czech Republic (both systems of extreme pluralism) do not have a single major party (which is defined as a party that received more than 15% of the votes in the previous two parliamentary elections). Another 11 have only one such party, and seven of these countries are post-communist, which confirms the statement that such party systems are more fragmented. Five countries (all in “old” Europe) have three such parties. However, the most common is the variant with two major parties – there are 18 such countries, exactly half of the sample analyzed by the researcher. Most of these major parties belong to traditional “party families” – center-left social democrats (such parties are major in 17 countries), Christian democrats or conservatives (in 15 countries), and right-wing liberals (in nine countries). This observation makes it possible to assert that the essence of inter-party competition, established after World War II, has not changed. In most countries, it is based on the same “broad center,” that is, competition between moderate political forces that adhere to the principles of a liberal democratic state structure.

At the same time, not the key, but very important parameters of this competition have changed. First, in a number of countries, there is still no such “broad center”. This is characteristic of many post-communist states, where the party field is either highly fragmented or, on the contrary, one predominant party has emerged: the dominant party in Hungary, the party having an absolute majority in Poland.

Second, even if the “broad center” persists, it no longer dominates absolutely. Its constituent parties

compete not only among themselves but also with their “neighbors” in their ideological and political niches; the latter were present in the political arena before, but rarely intervened in the dispute between the major parties. Two types of such competitors are most typical: more radical in their programs (as a rule, socioeconomic on the left wing, “cultural” – on the right) and the populist ones, which differ from mainstream parties by emphasizing the irreconcilable opposition between the “good people” and the “bad elite”. Certainly, in each country, the configuration of such confrontations develops differently, but in general, it has a more complex and multi-vector nature than in past decades.

The consequences of the fragmentation of party systems are ambivalent. To begin with, it should be noted that this process is objective in nature: it is determined by the complication of the system of salient socio-political cleavages and the change in the nature and intensity of the public demand to politicians. The expansion of the spectrum of parties represented in parliaments is essentially a democratic phenomenon: new groups of voters come to elections and get their representatives in power; the system of representation becomes more nuanced. The flip side of this process is the strengthening of destructive and anti-liberal trends introduced by populists and more radical left forces, which question the cornerstone concepts of the separation of powers, the importance of political power institutions, and the rule of law, to which the political establishment cannot but react. As an authoritative researcher of this phenomenon noted, in the future “the world will face a tragic choice between illiberal democracy – democracy without rights and undemocratic liberalism – rights without democracy” [24]. It is likely that this formulation of the question is too polemical. Although the political and parliamentary behavior of the new parties needs separate analysis, the evident trend is that the desire to consolidate their success and expand the electoral base encourages populist parties to moderate their radicalism. One can confidently speak of such an evolution with regard to parties as different as French National Rally (Marine Le Pen), Spanish Podemos, Greek SYRIZA, Hungarian Jobbik, and Danish People’s Party.

One more negative consequence of the fragmentation of party systems is the difficulty of forming coalition governments in parliamentary and premier-presidential systems and an increased risk of the break-up of ruling coalitions in the inter-election period. The first reason for these phenomena is “statistical”: if there are more parties in the parliament, their

factions (including the factions of the largest parties, potential senior partners of the coalition) are smaller; therefore, government coalitions become more multi-component, and a withdrawal of even a small party from the coalition is fraught with the fall of the cabinet. The second reason is political. Among the small parties in the parliament, there will inevitably be populist ones. Such parties are either not considered by the “establishment” parties as possible partners due to their antagonistic political positions, and then the circle of potential partners for the coalition narrows (for example, the parties Alternative for Germany and The Left in Germany won 22.5 and 16.6% of seats together in the last two elections, respectively), or turn out to be “uncomfortable partners” in the coalition. In the last few years alone, the formation of governments was delayed for a long time (or required repeated elections) in Belgium, Spain, Germany, and Bulgaria; for the first time in a long period, a coalition instead of a single-party government emerged in France after the 2022 elections. In the same years, coalitions in Italy, Austria, the Czech Republic, and Bulgaria broke up. It is evident (though it requires separate consideration) that the stability of cabinets and the political coalitions they rely on is a crucial

parameter for both the efficiency of public administration and the quality of democracy.

Regarding the future fragmentation process, it is difficult to provide an exact prediction. It seems that one should not expect the reverse trend – the defragmentation of party systems – in the foreseeable future. The complication of the system of salient cleavages is irreversible; it can remain as fragmented or become even more complicated. The socioeconomic well-being of the European population is also unlikely to improve in the near future: the effects of the pandemic, high inflation, and rising food and energy prices – all this will not improve living standards, and so will maintain skeptical attitudes toward the political elite. This, in turn, virtually guarantees the preservation of the populist parties’ electoral base. Volatility among small “second-tier” parties in each party system is currently high and will obviously remain at the same level, but this will have a rather weak impact on the ENPP indicator. However, the key question is not whether the process of fragmentation will stop at its current level or go further, but whether European political elites will be able to take advantage of this configuration of party systems and cope with the problems it creates.

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