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POLITICAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE POST-COLD WAR: CHOICES, CHALLENGES, AND OUTCOMES

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Abstract**—***The political transitions in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) after the Cold War were marked by the adoption of democratic regimes, primarily semi-presidential and parliamentary systems, influenced by Western European models. While these systems facilitated democratization and institutional development, they also revealed inherent challenges in the region's political contexts. Issues such as cabinet instability, executive conflicts in semi-presidential systems, party fragmentation, and single-party dominance have persisted, reflecting the complexities of political transformation. This paper examines the motivations behind the selection of political regimes in CEE countries, analyzes their structural characteristics, and evaluates the challenges encountered during their democratic transitions. By highlighting the dynamic interplay between historical legacies, political contexts, and institutional reforms, the study sheds light on the evolution and ongoing struggles of political systems in CEE.*

Keywords*— Post-Cold War, Central and Eastern Europe, Political Transitions, Semi-Presidential Systems, Democratization Challenges*

I. INTRODUCTION

After the Cold War, Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) embarked on a path of ideological pluralism, political democratization, and transition toward market economies[i]. The primary orientation and character of these transformations leaned towards a "Western European alignment," further reinforced by the progressive integration process with the European Union[ii]. A crucial step in CEE democratization was implementing regime changes, primarily by adopting democratic institutions modeled on Western European examples. Central to Western democratic regimes are several key features: major government positions are occupied through competitive elections, multiparty competition is encouraged, and power rotation is possible through electoral mechanisms. This system, commonly referred to as a representative democracy, has been traditionally divided into two basic forms: presidential and parliamentary systems. However, following the end of the Cold War, many CEE countries chose a semi-presidential system, resulting in a tripartite structure comprising presidential, parliamentary, and semi-presidential models.

In CEE, the establishment of representative democratic regimes manifested through actions such as removing restrictions on party formation, enabling free elections, promoting power equilibrium, establishing constitutional courts, and choosing new forms of governmental organization—primarily semi-presidential and parliamentary systems. The primary objective was to transform the prior system, where power was overly concentrated in a single leadership structure, into one where power balance and political pluralism were central values. Compared to former Soviet states and ex-Yugoslav countries, CEE states moved more quickly and earlier toward democratic transitions[iii], although some encountered challenges along the way.

This paper focuses on 16 CEE countries, analyzing the motivations behind the adoption of semi-presidential and parliamentary systems, examining the distinctive characteristics of these regimes, and identifying certain challenges to better understand CEE political structures and current political phenomena.

II. THE OVERALL CHOICES OF CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES AFTER THE END OF THE COLD WAR AND THEIR UNDERLYING REASONS

According to Elgie[iv], a majority of the former Soviet states transitioned to semi-presidential systems following the collapse of the Soviet Union. These included countries such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, and Ukraine, as well as Lithuania, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan (until 2010), Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Moldova (prior to 2000). Similarly, more than half of the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries adopted semi-presidential systems, including Bulgaria, Croatia, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia (post-1999), Slovenia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. After gaining independence, Serbia and Montenegro also joined this group. In total, 11 of the 16 CEE nations now operate under semi-presidential systems[v], while only five opted for parliamentary systems: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Estonia, and Albania. Notably, within the semi-presidential group, former Soviet states predominantly implemented the "presidential-parliamentary" structure, whereas CEE nations overwhelmingly preferred the "premier-presidential" model.

A. Post-Cold War Regime Choices and Rationale in CEE Countries

Following the Cold War, the political systems in former Soviet, CEE, and Western European countries generally fell into three categories: presidential-parliamentary, premier-presidential, and parliamentary. Positioned geographically between Western Europe and the former Soviet Union, many CEE countries adopted the premier-presidential model, which represented a middle ground between the presidential-parliamentary and parliamentary systems. This decision was not merely due to the lack of strong parliamentary traditions but also reflected the balance of political power during the period of regime selection.

In the former Soviet Union, despite the introduction of free elections and the lifting of party restrictions, the ruling Communist Party's successors retained significant influence during the early 1990s. This dominance allowed the former Communist elite to exert considerable control over the constitution-drafting process and the choice of political systems. Due to a weak parliamentary tradition in the Soviet bloc, these countries gravitated toward systems that centralized authority in the presidency. As a result, the presidential-parliamentary model, which grants significant executive powers to the president, became the preferred choice in the region.

Conversely, in CEE countries, strong opposition movements played a critical role during the regime-selection process. For instance, Poland had the "Solidarity" movement, Romania the "National Salvation Front," Bulgaria the "Union of Democratic Forces," Croatia the "Croatian Democratic Union," Slovenia the "Slovenian Democratic Opposition," North Macedonia the "Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity," and Lithuania the "Sąjūdis Movement for Reform" (Frison-Roche, 2008)[vi]. While Romania's National Salvation Front enjoyed a dominant position, other countries faced extended political struggles. In this context, the premier-presidential system emerged as a compromise that facilitated "dual survival" for both the former elites and opposition forces. As Frison-Roche (2008) observed, the premier-presidential system under conditions of political uncertainty provides a "stable power-sharing arrangement for diverse political actors."[vii]

Poland exemplifies this dynamic. During the early 1990s, the "Solidarity" movement adopted a power-sharing arrangement described as "your president, our prime minister," which led to the establishment of the premier-presidential model. However, conflicts arose when Lech Wałęsa, elected president in 1990, sought a more centralized presidential system. His efforts were consistently resisted by a left-leaning parliamentary majority, leading to protracted tensions between the presidency and parliament . The adoption of the "Little Constitution" in 1992 curtailed presidential powers, limiting the president's ability to dismiss the prime minister or cabinet members and granting parliament ultimate authority over government appointments. Subsequent constitutional reforms in 1997 further reduced presidential powers, solidifying Poland's premier-presidential system with a relatively weak presidency .

A similar compromise occurred in Slovenia, where constitutional debates in 1991 highlighted competing interests. Milan Kučan, a key figure in Slovenia's independence movement and former chairman of the Slovenian Communist Party's Central Committee, enjoyed widespread public support and was expected to win a direct presidential election. However, the legislative assembly, controlled by the "Anti-Communist Coalition," advocated for a parliamentary

model. The resulting compromise created a semi-presidential system with a largely ceremonial presidency, reflecting Slovenia's traditional emphasis on parliamentary governance.

B. Reasons for Adopting Parliamentary Systems in Certain CEE Countries

Several CEE countries opted for parliamentary systems due to historical precedents and contemporary political conditions. Historically, nations such as Hungary, Albania, Latvia, Estonia, and Czechoslovakia had established parliamentary traditions prior to World War II. For example, Hungary's parliamentary institution dates back to the late 13th century, making it one of the world's oldest legislative bodies. Similarly, Latvia's 1922 constitution, Estonia's 1920 constitution, and Czechoslovakia's 1920 constitution all codified parliamentary governance. After the Cold War, these nations often sought to restore pre-war political models, opting for parliamentary systems as a nod to their historical legacies .

Contemporary political considerations also influenced these choices. The legislative reforms and state-building processes required after the Cold War elevated the role of parliaments in many CEE countries. Without dominant political figures to shape the political landscape, parliaments became central to determining political structures. In contrast, countries led by strong leaders—such as Lech Wałęsa in Poland, Ion Iliescu in Romania, and Milan Kučan in Slovenia—tended to adopt semi-presidential systems to balance power between presidents and prime ministers.

Slovakia presents an illustrative case. Although its parliament was established in 1969, it lacked meaningful authority until the end of the Cold War. Following the Velvet Revolution, Slovakia's parliament asserted its role in the constitution-drafting process. The 1992 Slovak constitution centralized legislative authority within the parliament, granting it the power to appoint and dismiss the prime minister, force government resignations through no-confidence votes, and oversee judicial appointments. While Slovakia transitioned to direct presidential elections in 1999, it retained an honorific semi-presidential model, with parliament remaining the primary locus of political power.

II. CHARACTERISTICS OF POST-TRANSITION POLITICAL REGIMES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE (CEE)

An analysis of political regimes across Europe highlights a noteworthy trend: as one moves westward, parliamentary attributes grow stronger and legislative authority becomes more pronounced (with exceptions like France); conversely, presidential traits and executive power become more dominant further east. Positioned between these extremes, CEE countries have emphasized a more balanced distribution of power between legislative and executive branches.

In the post-transition period, CEE nations largely attributed the economic stagnation and political crises of the Communist era to the monopolistic and highly centralized political systems of the former Communist and Workers' Parties. Therefore, dismantling power monopolies and adopting Western-style multiparty representative democracies, characterized by the clear separation of legislative, executive, and judicial powers, became a shared aspiration throughout the region.

Presidential and presidential-parliamentary systems, which centralize executive authority in the president and resemble the prior centralized structures, were broadly rejected by CEE countries seeking ideological pluralism and equitable power-sharing. For example, efforts by Poland's Lech Wałęsa to introduce a presidential system and by Lithuania's Vytautas Landsbergis to establish a presidential-parliamentary model both failed. Ultimately, CEE nations opted for semi-presidential systems modeled on France or parliamentary systems inspired by Britain or Germany, aligning themselves with Western democratic norms. However, whether semi-presidential or parliamentary systems were chosen, CEE countries placed a greater emphasis on ensuring balanced and shared power compared to their Western European counterparts. This focus on equilibrium is evident in several dimensions.

A. Balancing Legislative and Executive Powers, and Ensuring Internal Checks on Executive Authority

CEE nations demonstrated a strong commitment to institutional "checks and balances" in the design of their post-Cold War political systems, particularly in semi-presidential frameworks. Although many adopted premier-presidential systems modeled after France, the CEE versions incorporated even stricter measures to ensure power equilibrium. This is apparent in both the allocation of authority between the president and parliament and the internal distribution of executive powers.

In France's semi-presidential system, the president holds considerable authority and occupies a dominant position in the political hierarchy, including a decisive role in appointing the prime minister. By contrast, in CEE premier-presidential systems, the president's authority is comparatively weaker, with parliaments playing a more significant role in selecting the head of state. Additionally, the internal division of executive powers underscores the importance of balance. Unlike in France, where the president directly oversees administrative matters, CEE presidents lack the authority to appoint or dismiss the prime minister or cabinet members. Instead, their executive powers are often confined to foreign policy and national security, and even in these areas, consultation with the prime minister and relevant ministers is typically required.

Debates over international representation—such as whether the president or prime minister should represent the country—further underscore this distinction. In countries like Poland and Romania, the prime minister is often designated as the nation's representative, diverging from the French model. Moreover, CEE presidents are generally required to secure the prime minister's countersignature for executive orders, introducing an additional layer of checks. While the president may hold symbolic primacy, practical administrative authority is often concentrated in the prime minister's office. Nonetheless, this premier-presidential model—characterized by a "strong prime minister and weak president"—can result in centralized authority if the president, prime minister, and parliamentary majority all belong to the same party, as exemplified by Poland's Law and Justice Party, which consolidated control over parliament, the cabinet, and the presidency in 2015[viii].

Establishing Proportional Representation and Multi-Party Competition to Ensure Power Sharing

Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries diverged from Western European political practices by adopting distinct electoral systems. Western European nations typically employ two primary types of parliamentary election systems: majority rule and mixed-member electoral systems. In majority rule systems, each electoral district elects a single representative based on a majority vote, as seen in France and the United Kingdom. This approach tends to favor larger parties, often leading to a "winner-takes-all" dynamic that disadvantages smaller parties. Mixed-member electoral systems, used in countries like Italy and Germany, balance this by combining small-district majority voting with proportional representation, allowing smaller parties some representation and often resulting in coalition governments where major parties collaborate with smaller ones.

In contrast, most CEE countries have adopted proportional representation. Among the 16 CEE nations, several implemented proportional representation directly in their first parliamentary elections, including the Czech Republic, Estonia, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Latvia. Others transitioned from majority rule or mixed-member systems, such as Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Hungary, and Albania. Only Bulgaria, Croatia, and Lithuania continue to employ mixed-member systems, though these still incorporate substantial proportional representation. By emphasizing power-sharing, proportional representation enables a broad spectrum of political parties to enter parliament, frequently resulting in coalition governments. Scholars have argued that the main advantage of proportional representation is its capacity to "more fully, accurately, and faithfully reflect public opinion."

Additionally, CEE countries have made significant efforts to promote and regulate political party development, establishing frameworks to foster multiparty systems with periodic leadership changes. One such measure has been setting relatively low thresholds for political party registration. For example, Poland's 1997 Political Parties Act requires only 1,000 adult signatures for a party to register, without necessitating the submission of a party platform or charter, nor mandating that party leaders be democratically elected. Romania's 1996 Political Parties Act initially required 10,000 founding members to register a party—a threshold raised to 25,000 in 2003—alongside requirements for a party charter and platform, although these remain lenient by international standards. Another initiative involves providing substantial subsidies to political parties participating in elections. In Poland, parties that receive at least 2% of the vote but fail to meet the electoral threshold of 5% are granted financial support, while those securing parliamentary seats receive higher subsidies. Similarly, in Romania, parties with 2% of the vote qualify for public funding, and those surpassing the electoral threshold receive additional financing based on the number of parliamentary seats won. In Western Europe, however, countries like Germany impose stricter requirements,

mandating detailed platforms and charters with specific provisions on internal organization and election procedures. Furthermore, Western European countries generally limit campaign finance subsidies more than their CEE counterparts.

This combination of proportional representation, low registration thresholds, and generous campaign finance subsidies enabled CEE countries to rapidly establish multiparty systems. However, this also initially led to highly fragmented parliamentary landscapes, as seen in Poland, where 29 parties entered parliament after the 1990 elections. To reduce parliamentary fragmentation, most CEE countries subsequently introduced electoral thresholds—typically around 5% for individual parties and between 7% and 10% for party alliances. Despite these efforts, most CEE countries continue to have at least five parties represented in parliament, leading to widespread coalition governments. The benefits of this arrangement include fairer power distribution, reduced concentration of authority, and a structure that counters the "single-party domination of parliament, cabinet, and presidency" sometimes observed in traditional Western parliamentary systems.

C. Establishment of Constitutional Courts

Today, more than 40 countries globally have established constitutional courts. In Western Europe, nations such as Austria, Germany, Spain, Italy, Portugal, and Belgium have set up constitutional courts, while France operates a comparable institution known as the Constitutional Council. Following the Cold War, constitutional courts were widely adopted by Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries to uphold constitutional governance, strengthen the authority of newly crafted constitutions, and ensure their enforcement. As a result, CEE has become one of the regions with the highest prevalence of constitutional courts. Of the 16 CEE countries, 15 have established these courts, with Estonia being the exception, where its Supreme Court assumes the role of a constitutional court. These institutions have played a key role in reinforcing constitutional authority across the region, promoting adherence to constitutional governance, and facilitating the effective functioning of emerging political regimes.

In comparison to their Western European counterparts, which typically focus on technical aspects such as constitutional review and interpretation, CEE constitutional courts have taken on dual responsibilities, addressing both judicial and political matters during their nations' transition processes. Given the nascent state of many CEE constitutions, which often included ambiguities requiring further clarification, constitutional courts frequently engaged in creative interpretation. Additionally, these courts often served as political mediators, resolving disputes among presidents, prime ministers, parliaments, and political parties. However, an area of contention lies in the fact that CEE presidents are directly responsible for appointing approximately one-third of constitutional court judges, which has occasionally led to a bias in favor of presidential interests.

One prominent example is the Romanian Constitutional Court's ruling regarding President Ion Iliescu's term of office. Elected as Romania's first post-Communist president in May 1990 with an overwhelming 85% of the vote, Iliescu secured another term in 1992 following the adoption of a new constitution. However, as his second term ended in 1996, Iliescu faced resistance in his bid to seek a third term, given the constitutional limit of two presidential terms. Initially, the Constitutional Court had ruled in 1992 that Iliescu's 1992–1996 tenure constituted his second term. However, leveraging his influence within the Constitutional Court, Iliescu successfully had the decision overturned in 1996. The court reinterpreted his tenure, declaring the 1992–1996 period as his first official term on the grounds that his 1990 election had occurred prior to the implementation of the new constitutional framework[ix]. This ruling allowed Iliescu to run for a third term in the 1996 election, although he ultimately lost, before returning to power in 2000.

Despite occasional inconsistencies and perceived biases, constitutional courts in CEE countries have generally maintained significant authority and influence, playing a crucial role in shaping the political dynamics of the region.

III. KEY CHALLENGES IN CEE POLITICAL REGIMES

Over the more than two decades since the beginning of the post-Cold War transition, CEE countries have made notable strides in achieving political stability and social cohesion, with both semi-presidential and parliamentary systems playing significant roles in democratic consolidation. However, the region's limited history with democratic governance and the relative novelty of its democratic institutions have revealed several structural and operational challenges. These issues have magnified existing weaknesses inherent to both semi-presidential and parliamentary models. Among the most pressing challenges are fragmented party systems, fragile coalition governments, executive dualism in premier-presidential systems, and instances of single-party dominance across legislative, executive, and presidential roles. The key issues are summarized below.

A. Cabinet Instability in Semi-Presidential and Parliamentary Systems

Cabinet instability is a pervasive issue in both semi-presidential and parliamentary systems across the CEE region, stemming from similar structural and political dynamics. In CEE semi-presidential systems, as in parliamentary ones, the selection of prime ministers typically hinges on coalition-building within parliament. Due to the highly fragmented nature of CEE parliaments, forming majority coalitions often necessitates the collaboration of three or more parties. This configuration inherently increases the likelihood of internal divisions and disputes, which can culminate in the collapse of coalitions and the dissolution of cabinets.

In semi-presidential systems, cabinet instability is further exacerbated by conflicts within the executive branch. These conflicts often arise from personal disputes or power struggles between the president and the prime minister. While CEE presidents generally lack the direct authority to dismiss prime ministers or dissolve cabinets, they can leverage their popular mandate to exert indirect pressure on prime ministers, creating a politically volatile environment. For instance, Lithuanian President Valdas Adamkus criticized Prime Minister Gediminas Vagnorius publicly in 1999, ultimately leading to the prime minister's resignation, as public opinion sided with the directly elected president. Similarly, in Bulgaria, right-wing President Zhelyu Zhelev frequently clashed with left-wing Prime Minister Zhan Videnov between 1994 and 1996. Zhelev's repeated use of veto power over government decisions—particularly personnel appointments—and his frequent referrals of parliamentary proposals to the Constitutional Court weakened Videnov's government, culminating in the cabinet's resignation.

Data on prime ministerial changes across the 16 CEE countries since the onset of the transition highlights the frequency of cabinet turnover. According to this data, prime ministers in CEE countries have an average tenure of just 1.36 years. Notably, even parliamentary systems—traditionally considered more stable—demonstrate significant cabinet instability in the CEE context. Among the five parliamentary countries, only the Czech Republic's average prime ministerial tenure surpasses the CEE regional average of 1.36 years.

This widespread cabinet instability stems not only from structural issues inherent to these regime types but also from the relatively nascent and unstable political environments in CEE countries. However, with the stabilization of party affiliations, the clarification of ideological alignments, and the strengthening of coalitions, the stability of prime ministers and cabinets has improved significantly in the 21st century compared to the turbulent 1990s.

B. Dual Executive Challenges in Semi-Presidential Systems

Semi-presidential systems, particularly premier-presidential models, frequently encounter a critical issue known as "dual executive" conflicts, stemming from overlapping and competing powers between the president and prime minister. Renowned political scientists Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan contend that such conflicts are inherent to semi-presidential systems, especially in scenarios where the president lacks control over the parliamentary majority, the prime minister does not enjoy majority support in parliament, or constitutional provisions are ambiguous. Similarly, Arturo Valenzuela argues that semi-presidential systems may exacerbate, rather than alleviate, the executive conflicts associated with presidentialism.

While Western Europe's semi-presidential systems have not been immune to dual executive challenges, their mature democratic traditions and long-established political precedents have helped mitigate these conflicts. For instance, Finland has gradually curtailed the president's administrative role, restricting presidential authority to foreign affairs and national security, which must also involve consultation with the prime minister and relevant ministers. Amendments to Finland's constitution in 1999 further reduced presidential powers, assigning responsibility for European Union diplomacy to the prime minister. France, by contrast, has taken the opposite approach, granting the president extensive executive authority, thereby minimizing the potential for executive conflicts. During periods of political alignment—when the president and prime minister belong to the same party—conflicts are rare. Even during cohabitation, where the two executive heads represent opposing parties, French semi-presidentialism typically avoids political paralysis.

In contrast, intra-executive conflicts have been frequent and intense in CEE countries, often leading to political gridlock. Presidents and prime ministers in the region have repeatedly undermined one another's authority, stalling effective governance. This prevalence of dual executive conflicts in CEE stems not only from the structural design of semi-presidential systems but also from distinct regional factors. First, the multiparty nature of CEE parliaments increases the likelihood of presidents and prime ministers hailing from different parties, thus fostering "cohabitation." Second, many CEE constitutions require both presidential decrees and cabinet decisions to be countersigned by the other party, a measure intended to encourage cooperation but often exploited as leverage for coercion. Third, the simultaneous processes of nation-building, political transformation, and integration into supranational organizations

like the EU and NATO have elevated certain political figures, who, upon assuming the presidency, may seek to expand their powers beyond constitutional limits, clashing with the authority of the prime minister.

Numerous examples illustrate these intra-executive conflicts. In Poland, Donald Tusk of the Civic Platform party, who became prime minister in 2007, faced constant clashes with President Lech Kaczyński of the opposing Law and Justice party. A particularly heated dispute arose in 2008 over who would represent Poland at a European Union summit. The conflict escalated to the Polish Constitutional Court, which ruled that while the president retained the right to "attend" international meetings, the government held primary responsibility for foreign policy. This ruling upheld the president's symbolic presence but denied independent representation without cabinet approval. Despite the court's decision, Tusk and Kaczyński continued to clash on multiple fronts, with Kaczyński frequently vetoing parliamentary legislation, thereby stymying the government's agenda.

Romania has also witnessed persistent intra-executive conflicts. The Romanian newspaper Ziua aptly characterized the nation's semi-presidentialism as akin to "a car with two drivers." During his presidency (2004–2014), Democratic President Traian Băsescu frequently clashed with Prime Ministers Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu and Victor Ponta. The hostility between Băsescu and Ponta reached unprecedented levels, culminating in parliament initiating impeachment proceedings against Băsescu, while Băsescu accused Ponta of espionage. These ongoing disputes severely hampered the government's administrative capacity.

However, when presidents and prime ministers belong to the same party, and that party commands an absolute parliamentary majority, dual executive conflicts tend to diminish. Yet this situation can lead to excessive power consolidation. A case in point is Poland following the 2015 parliamentary elections, when the Law and Justice Party secured a majority in both chambers of parliament and controlled the presidency under Andrzej Duda. This consolidation enabled Prime Minister Beata Szydło's government to enact sweeping constitutional reforms, including raising the majority threshold for Constitutional Court decisions from a simple majority (8 out of 15 judges) to a two-thirds majority (10 out of 15 judges), effectively curbing the court's powers while expanding executive authority. These actions provoked criticism from international organizations, including the European Commission and the Venice Commission.

C. Intrinsic Challenges of Parliamentary Systems

Hungarian scholar Ágh Attila argues that post-Cold War parliamentary systems in CEE countries sought to modernize pre-World War II democratic traditions by integrating successful Western parliamentary practices [x]. This modernization gave parliaments a dominant role in governance, often resulting in a phenomenon Ágh describes as "hyper-parliamentarism." However, this hyper-parliamentarism has generally occurred only in cases where the ruling party simultaneously controls the parliament, cabinet, and presidency.

Slovakia provides a notable example. Between 1994 and 1998, under Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar's leadership, the ruling party dominated the parliamentary majority, while the president's position was also controlled by the party. This created an environment of hyper-parliamentarism, as the legislature faced little meaningful opposition. In 1999, Slovakia's newly formed governing coalition amended the constitution, transferring presidential elections from parliament to a direct electoral system, effectively transitioning the country to a semi-presidential framework to address these power imbalances.

In recent years, especially following the 2008 financial crisis, CEE politics has witnessed a noticeable rightward shift. Prolonged dominance of right-wing parties across executive, legislative, and presidential institutions has been particularly evident in Hungary and the Czech Republic. Hungary's parliamentary elections in April 2010 saw the "Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Alliance" win 52.73% of the vote, securing over two-thirds of parliamentary seats. Although Fidesz's vote share declined slightly in 2014, it maintained its two-thirds parliamentary majority (133 out of 199 seats), allowing it to form a single-party cabinet and consolidate power over all major government branches, including the presidency. In 2012, the Fidesz-led parliament hastily passed a new constitution filled with ambiguities, facing minimal opposition. Furthermore, the parliament dismissed the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court mid-term, appointing a Fidesz-affiliated replacement. According to the *Economist Intelligence Unit's* 2014 Democracy Index, democratic standards in Hungary have significantly declined, with the country ranking lowest among the new EU member states. This decline is closely tied to the Fidesz party's consolidation of power, extending its control over the Supreme Audit Office, the National Media and Infocommunications Authority, and the central bank.

Similarly, Czech politics have shifted toward conservatism since the financial crisis. In the 2010 parliamentary elections, the left-wing Social Democratic Party secured the largest share of votes (22.09%) but failed to form a government due to the parliamentary majority held by right-wing parties. This allowed the Civic Democratic Party, which received the second-highest vote share, to form a conservative cabinet. With Václav Klaus, a Civic Democratic

Party member, serving as president since 2003, the party controlled the parliament, cabinet, and presidency simultaneously, further consolidating power.

Parliamentary systems in transitioning countries carry inherent risks, particularly when a single party secures a parliamentary majority. This often enables the party to dominate both the cabinet and the presidency, resulting in hyper-parliamentarism and concentrated authority. By contrast, semi-presidential systems inherently limit such power consolidation. Even if a party controls the parliamentary majority, it can only dominate the prime minister and cabinet, as the president is directly elected by the people and remains primarily accountable to the electorate, not to the ruling parliamentary party. This structural distinction provides a potential safeguard against excessive centralization of power in semi-presidential systems.

IV. CONCLUSION

In the first decade of the transition, despite various challenges, Central and Eastern European countries largely achieved political stability, the establishment of constitutions, and regime transformation. During the second decade, their political systems generally functioned well, although certain issues arose in specific countries. Around 2010, as political systems became more refined and citizens' political stances clearer, the fragmentation and factionalism within political parties in the region began to diminish. Political bases of parties grew more stable and enduring, with some parties successfully resonating with voters' sentiments and emotions, becoming stronger and more stable than before. In parliaments, "party fragmentation" gradually gave way to "stable party (alliances)" or "monopoly party (alliances)." Moreover, after transitioning from "candidate countries" to full EU members, the EU's oversight and constraints on democracy, the rule of law, and human rights weakened. Coupled with the 2008 financial crisis, this resulted in a significant rightward political shift in the region, rising nationalist sentiments, and a partial decline in democracy, the rule of law, and human rights in some countries.

Recent issues in Central and Eastern Europe stem from various factors, including certain institutional flaws. Notable challenges include "dual executive" conflicts caused by unclear delineations of executive powers, single-party dominance over the legislative, executive, and judicial branches, and the president's authority to appoint one-third of constitutional court judges, which often results in constitutional courts favoring the president. Additionally, low thresholds for party alliances in elections, low thresholds for presidential elections in parliamentary systems, and the predominance of unicameral parliaments in the region further increase the potential for ruling parties to monopolize legislative bodies.

In the early years of transition, many countries saw the rise of highly respected individuals who assumed the presidency, while other state institutions were gradually formed and strengthened following the establishment of the presidential role. This gave presidents significant power during the early 1990s, and in some cases, throughout the entire decade. However, as these prominent figures exited the political stage and legislative, executive, and judicial institutions became more established, the political systems in Central and Eastern Europe increasingly shifted towards a "parliamentary orientation," with greater authority vested in parliaments and their representatives—the cabinets. In other words, powers that were once ambiguously defined were increasingly allocated to cabinets rather than presidents. For instance, in Poland, while Lech Wałęsa appointed the first cabinet, the authority to appoint cabinets gradually shifted to the prime minister. Similarly, in North Macedonia, during Kiro Gligorov's tenure as the first president (1991–1999), his personal authority elevated the presidency above the role of the prime minister. However, subsequent presidents lacked the same prestige and influence, and as they struggled to assert vaguely defined constitutional powers or exceed constitutional limitations, authority gradually shifted to the prime minister and cabinet, who govern on behalf of the parliamentary majority.

It is worth noting that with the departure of "strong" figures from the political scene, some more mature parties or party alliances have emerged in Central and Eastern Europe. These entities have, at times, exploited certain weaknesses within the region's political systems and the fragile foundations of domestic democracy to monopolize legislative and executive power for extended periods, thereby diminishing the influence of voters.

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