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# EXPERT INTERVIEW

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## Democratic Deficit in Party Political Systems

### Expert Interview with Professor Zsolt Enyedi

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*“The likelihood that you suddenly have a new leader coming from nowhere and taking over an entire state is still larger in the East. That is one of the indications of the weakness of the party systems.”*

**Zsolt Enyedi** is currently a Leverhulme Visiting Professor at the Department of Politics & International Relations (DPIR) of the University of Oxford. He is a Professor at the Political Science Department of Central European University (CEU) and has published extensively on party systems, political attitudes, populism, church and state relations, religion and politics, de-democratization, democratization, party organization, and authoritarianism. At CEU, Dr Enyedi supervised 13 doctoral students and close to 80 MA students and served as head of department, director of doctoral school and, between 2016 and 2020, as pro-rector. Dr Enyedi is particularly interested in the relationship between agency and structure in the development of political cleavages, and in right-wing political ideologies.

Dr Enyedi was the 2003 recipient of the Rudolf Wildenmann Prize, the 2004 winner of the Bibó Award and in 2020 received the Award of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. He has also held research fellowships at the Woodrow Wilson Center, Kellogg Institute (Notre Dame University), the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies, the European University Institute (Florence, Italy) and at Johns Hopkins University.

GIP has had the honor of interviewing Dr. Enyedi via Zoom platform, where he answered questions relating to challenges faced by political party systems in European states. During the interview, particular emphasis was placed on political polarization and the failure of party political systems to institutionalize political life in Eastern European states.

*GIP: How important is the length of democratic experience in terms of the resilience of a party political system?*

**ZE:** Thank you. It depends on how you define exactly resilience. If you mean by that that the regime and the political system remain democratic, for sure, this is much more likely in countries that have a democratic past already. So, to some extent, the past predicts the present and probably the future. You have very few cases where long-established democracies would be in danger of collapsing.

There was a lot of talk about this possibility during Trump's presidency in the United States. But I think that story was not one where a country was really close to a democratic breakdown. There were some problematic developments but the danger was not as big as some perceived. Otherwise, what you see is that democracies that have existed since 19th century, or early 20th century, are typically robust. Of course, there are examples within these cases where the party system has collapsed while the democracy remains relatively intact. That was a case to some extent in Italy. Again, it depends on when you consider the beginning of Italian democracy. But even if you count it as starting after the Second World War, it's still a relatively well-established democracy. And yet the party system has basically collapsed in the early 1990s. Democracy, however, has survived.

There are also question marks concerning the quality of democracy. And in our book with Fernando Casal Bértoa, we showed that if you control for various other factors like economic development and electoral systems and many other features of the political regimes, then it is not necessarily the case that the more democratic systems would be those which have a stronger party system, if by strength you mean stability and predictability.

While in general, there is a correlation between the two in the sense that typically those systems that have some regularity in the way they operate also produce higher quality democracy. This is to a large extent due to other factors, as those systems that are typically considered to be stable party systems are also quite rich. They have less inequality and they have a longer democratic path. So, it is no wonder that they are also producing higher quality democracy. But once you control for all these factors, then what you can see, at least if you take economic conditions into account, is that in poorer countries, if you make the party system more stable and predictable, then actually you reduce the quality of democracy. And in many of the post-communist cases, this is spectacularly the case; some of the most stable or predictable party systems are in those countries in Eastern Europe where you have two or three major parties and other parties do not matter. And in these cases, it often happens that the party in government monopolizes power and excludes the opposition.

On paper, what you see is that there are strong parties, that these parties have strong social support, but that does not go together with high quality democracy. Actually, what you see is rather that those systems, (and actually some of the post-Soviet systems belong here, like the Baltic countries) with lots of small parties, are not particularly stable. Quite often, you have new parties appearing and old ones disappearing. In these systems, you have a relatively high quality of democracy; you don't have those kinds of autocratic tendencies that you have with the entire party system presentation.

*GIP: Can a gap between the voter performance and agendas of party elites be discerned? If so, could this be the cause of political polarization?*

**ZE:** Actually, this question refers to two separate phenomena: the quality of representation and the polarization. And there's an interesting interplay between the two. So, the parties and in general, the political elite, indeed have different preferences than ordinary citizens, and this could be considered a problem of democracy or representation. Although, it also matters what you consider to be a big difference. If you look at that left-right orientation of citizens and parties in most European countries the difference is not that big. Typically, voters have the same left-right position as the parties. But it's true that voters and parties are often concerned with very different issues. They have different priorities.

There is also a general tendency across Europe of having an electorate that is more interested in redistribution in leftist economic policies, while the elite is more right-wing in that regard. But we also often see the opposite pattern on cultural issues. That is, the party elites, on certain issues that are less conservative, are less authoritarian than the voters. And this is partly simply because party elites are part of the social elite and the social elite is more educated, and usually higher education leads to more progressive views. And I'm not sure that this is necessarily a problem, that there is this gap or difference between voters and the elite.

What is true in many instances is that this difference is smaller if the system is more polarized. This happens when you have one fundamental social conflict in society, creating a big cleavage between the left and right-wing bloc. The result is relatively homogeneous blocs fighting against each other. And then the difference between the voters of a particular party and the elite of the particular party is not big. But at the same time, the system itself can become unsustainable because the gap between the left and the right is huge, meaning that you can replace the left and right with any other labels that

are relevant in the respective country. So, what seems to be desirable is to have a depolarized system where political actors can talk to each other and can reach a compromise. This can be sometimes frustrating for those radical citizens who would like a revolutionary change and would like to get rid of the opposition completely. But, I think, in general, compromise and the ability to work together is extremely important. Probably this is what the Georgian story tells you as well, that if you do not have trust between the elites of the different camps, then the state itself will not function properly.

*GIP: How valid is the statement that we often hear about classical political ideologies no longer being relevant?*

**ZE:** There are some analysts who are convinced that ideologies no longer matter, that they have completely disappeared, partly because politicians became very pragmatic. They just focus on opinion polls and they do not have principles anymore. And also Communism as an alternative basically disappeared. There are no serious political actors who advocate for some sort of corporatist fascist system either. But I think that ideology still matters a lot. They have changed in many countries. And it's spectacular to see how they have changed in some cases. Well, if you look at Western Europe, what is spectacular is the advance of the environmentalist approach and how many of the classical socialist parties have moved away from a Marxist perspective and became much more pragmatically oriented and also more focused on the needs of the educated classes as opposed to blue-collar workers. You also see a transformation on the right. This is partly because in general, in the West, attitudes have changed.

So, by now, it's completely normal to see Christian Democratic conservative politicians endorsing

same-sex marriage. And many of the moral issues that were originally campaigned by the left are now accepted on the right as well. At the same time, you also see a backlash to progressive reforms, liberal democratic reforms, and to the desire for stronger leadership and resistance against the forces of globalization, immigration, as well as more support for economic protectionism. So to defend your own markets and not let that global competition to have a too large impact on domestic matters. And then in some cases, proper anti-liberal or illiberal forces are rising and are more successful than in the past. This is something that makes even some Western elections very exciting, like in Italy or to some extent in France.

There is a possibility that you may have at one upcoming election, radical right becoming victorious, and that's a big change now. In Eastern Europe there are, of course, differences because East Europeans were not socialized into the classical post-second war ideological debates. There was very little influence in Eastern Europe of how the Christian Democrats have modernized, how socialists have incorporated the heritage of the 1968 student revolution. Also, Eastern Europe was left out of this debate. And partly because of that, you have different configurations.

On the one hand, you have the interesting phenomenon of centrist populism. So, there are some political entrepreneurs who have no ideology, but in general, are trying to make a career out of claiming that there is a corrupt elite and that they are fighting the corrupt elite. This is why they need to get all the power. And then you see, indeed, some fundamentalist groups emerging. Some of them have a religious background. They are usually Christian and try to revive certain old conservative traditions. And you have also quite a lot of xenophobia that is not tempered by the political correctness that you see in the West. In Eastern Europe, you still see openly racist, anti-Semitic or discriminatory rhetoric in

parliament, in the media, and in the government. So, in some sense, the range of alternatives in the east is wider because in the West there is some sort of consensus about what is not permissible in democratic debate and about what kind of arguments are wrong. These days, of course, there are debates about the boundaries, but there is a more robust consensus than in the East where there was no time for these norms to crystallize. As a result, people may come up with extreme alternatives.

*GIP: What is truly the driving force behind political parties?*

**ZE:** When you compare countries, you must realize that you must examine different questions in different countries. So, it can happen that in some countries parties do not differ for example regarding taxes; whether there should be higher taxes or lower taxes. But they do differ on some other issues. Therefore, we should not necessarily use the template that has been used for studying ideology in Western Europe in other regions of the world.

I think it's true that ideological structures are less relevant in new democracies outside of Western Europe. There are many reasons for that. One is the shortness of democratic experience, the fact that the civil society is weaker. So, in the West, ideologies were not only produced by elites and political figures, but behind them there were mass organizations, trade unions and other huge organizations that have millions of members, and within these organizations people were debating the proper position on various social matters. So, there was an education that went beyond the education that you get in schools. But also in the schools, there is typically more civic education going on in the West than in other countries. So, in that sense, there is a deeper understanding about politics.

The role of charismatic leaders is usually smaller in the West. Party organizations are usually more democratic. So in East, it very often happens that small cliques of political entrepreneurs who have the resources in a non-transparent way, capture political parties. And then basically the question is which clique and which clientele is able to capture state power. This is something where the media has no strong influence. The media cannot control politicians, where actually the media is in the pockets of politicians. This is mostly the case where there is also a lot of economic uncertainty, so ordinary people are more focused on day-to-day survival, and they have difficulties establishing their political preferences and policies.

There is also, of course, some cultural differences that exist between different regions of the world. It just so happens that in the West, many of these ideological debates have an extremely long tradition. For example, you can trace such debates back to the Enlightenment and debates between conservatives and liberals in the 18th century. In other parts of the world, you rarely see this kind of ideological debate. And as we mentioned, it's already declining in the West as well, to some extent because of the more idiosyncratic, mixed baggage. But for sure, I think new democracies have a duty to try to force politicians to state clearly their values, and how their values differ. The media should force politicians, if possible, to have proper debates. There should be intellectuals who help parties work out these ideological packages. So, politics should not be left to those political entrepreneurs who are only interested in enriching themselves. There should be intellectuals involved in the discussion and debate about fundamental alternatives ways of organizing society and connecting basic values to specific policies.

*GIP: To what degree could we explain this radicalization as an outcome of a democratic deficit?*

**EZ:** Well, especially if you mean radicalization in East or post-communist countries, as I mentioned, it's partly because some of the social intellectual development that took place in the West during the Cold War era which did not happen in the east. For example, Communism suppressed religion and now some religious actors try to reestablish what existed before communism. While in Western countries, even representatives of churches have embraced the fundamental principles of liberal democracy, which include separation of the church and state, a neutral state, and religious freedom. But there is also the fact that cultural changes in the West happened extremely fast over the past 20 to 30 years. It's to some extent understandable that not every country in Europe wants to follow these radical changes.

However, they are also under pressure because we are living in a globalized world and there are certain norms that are represented by international organizations, such as the Olympics, song festivals like Eurovision, or any other international organization you can think of. As these international organizations and big corporations such as Hollywood and the national media, often represent and reflect intellectual changes in the West. Therefore, there is difference between their values, which have changed a lot lately, and the values of those who are still living according to the norms of the past or different social configurations.

So, I think radicalization is partly due to the fact that there was an actual progressive change that happened too fast for many people. And also it happened at that time when globalization hurt many societies, or at least affected them to a different degree, made some rich and made others



poor. This unhappiness with economic insecurity and inequality sort of projected on globalization and civic globalization is also considered the driving force behind cultural change that is also cultural opposition to the new norms.

*GIP: What are the different patterns of party systems in Western and Eastern Europe?*

**ZE:** I will add one thing that was partly mentioned. The parties in Eastern European countries still have weaker social roots and weaker organizational embeddedness in the society than the Western parties. Even though in the West, the number of party members is extremely low, they still have somewhat stronger linkages to civic society actors than in the East. That is partly because of more instability in the East. The likelihood that you suddenly have a new leader coming from nowhere and taking over an entire state is still larger in the East. That is one of the indications of the weakness of the party systems.

*GIP: Could you compare post-Soviet party systems to the party systems from other regions?*

**ZE:** All post-Communist countries' problems need to be multiplied. If you think about Soviet heritage. But there are obvious differences between the Baltic countries and the countries like Georgia and Armenia. When it comes to the party system closure, within Eastern Europe there are more closed systems. In Post-Communist countries and non-Soviet Post-Communist countries, you rarely find systems that are so much dominated by a few powerful actors in such a stable manner. You do have some examples of polarization that is similar, I think, to Georgia and Macedonia, especially in the Balkans, Macedonia, Montenegro, Albania, and, to some extent, Hungary.

These are cases where you have a high degree of polarization, relative stability and consistent parties alongside the inability of any government party to rule in a way that would be accepted by the opposition which could lead to some sort of political integration for the entire society. In this sense, there is a particular phenomenon going on, but not a specifically post-Soviet phenomenon. Rather, it is more a phenomenon that occurred in some Post-Soviet countries and in some non-post-Soviet countries.



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