

For thirty years, post-communist countries have been grappling with the daunting challenge of simultaneously creating democratic political institutions, market economies and, in many cases, establishing new nation states. On the bedrock of civil societies which were oppressively re-engineered and weakened by communist regimes, post-communist democracies have faced the equally enormous task of establishing functional and effective institutions of political representation to channel the demands of civil society into policy-making. While civil society is generally regarded as weak and passive in the region, as reflected in relatively low electoral turnout, partisan affiliation and organizational membership, political parties and organized interests have undergone extraordinarily complex developments in the post-communist region, often with unexpected twists and turns. While our knowledge of both political parties and organized interests as key channels of civil society in the region has grown considerably, we know very little about interactions between them and, in particular, what segments of civil society they are capturing. The proposed project therefore contributes to the small body of literature on the relationships between interest groups and political parties. First, we explore how populations of organized interests have evolved in CEE, and in particular, in the context of “democratic backsliding”, illiberalism and the “cartelization” of the state. After having mapped out the interest group landscape in terms of numbers, size, type and foundation dates of organizations, we address the ideological spaces that organized interests occupy. Do they overlap with those of political parties? Do they seek to fill in gaps abandoned by political parties? Has there been an alignment or de-alignment of organized interests and political parties in the phase of “democratic backsliding”? Third, we are interested in the strategic interactions between interest groups and parties. How frequent and institutionalized are their interactions? What factors motivate cooperation between organized interests and political parties? The project envisions a comparative research design of five post-communist countries –Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia and Slovakia. First, we systematically map the ideological positions of interest groups and political parties in the five countries to gain insights on the representative spaces which they cover, whether and how they are interlinked and what segments of society are particularly well catered to by parties and/or organized interests. Then we conduct an in-depth survey assessing various structural and strategic features of organized interests, and most importantly, the institutional, resource-related and ideological factors motivating their varying degrees of engagement with political parties. The quantitative analysis will be complemented by case study analyses to gain a more fine-grained understanding of crucial contextual variables and differences with respect to party-interest group interrelations.