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**Turnover and Legislative Institutionalization
in Romania, Hungary and Estonia**

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Paper prepared for the conference 'Twenty Years After: Parliamentary
Democracy and Parliamentary Representation in Post-Communist Europe', Jena,
7-8 May 2010. Panel 1: Between Consolidation and Deformation...

Abstract: The paper analyzes the impact that constantly high rates of turnover had on the institutionalization of Estonian, Hungarian and Romanian Parliaments during their first five post-communist terms. The study emphasizes the importance of parliamentary factions in this process and of committee leadership incumbency. A complete dataset of committee and Assembly elites was compiled and examined. The main finding is that although much more institutionalized than in the 1990s the three legislatures still differ very much in their boundedness and in their ability to retain and use the expertise of experienced MPs.

Keywords: legislative turnover; legislative institutionalization; committee elites; factions

Introduction

The present paper focuses on the impact moderately high legislative turnover rates have on the institutionalization of Parliaments in three relatively young democracies, namely Romania, Hungary and Estonia. This analysis tests the hypothesis elaborated by John Hibbing according to which legislative institutionalization is compatible with high rates of membership turnover (1999: 32). The author believed – drawing from organization theory - that essential is not to decrease the absolute rate of turnover, but to minimize its impact (Hibbing 1999: 33): the newcomers should be recruited and socialized in the new roles so as to replace successfully and in short time those departing. The idea challenged an entire tradition in legislative studies, which deemed high incumbency to be, by itself, an indicator of strong institutionalization. The founding father of this tradition was Nelson Polsby with his 1968 article: ‘The Institutionalization of the U.S. House of Representatives’. However, Hibbing’s assumption was never tested empirically in a comparative cross-national study.

The units of analysis of this study are the national Parliaments, while the units of observations are individual MPs and their staffs, committees and last but not least, parliamentary factions. The **research question** addressed is: how do high legislative turnover rates influence the institutionalization of Parliaments? A specific question is: under what conditions can the impact of unstable membership be neutralized: external (e.g.: recruitment and apprenticeship of appropriate new-comers), internal (stable leadership, high professionalization) or both?

The theoretical relevance of the project is firstly derived from the fact that only very few scholars have tackled the issue of legislative turnover impact over parliamentary institutionalization in a comparative perspective (Somit et al. 1994; Matland & Studlar 2004: 87-108), and when they did, they focused on advanced industrial democracies. To continue with, to the best of my knowledge, there was no empirical attempt of discovering a highly institutionalized Parliament that

exhibits at the same time low incumbency rates. If successful in this direction, the paper will make an important contribution to the measurement of institutionalization and will provide a better understanding of the relationship between individual membership, functioning of Parliaments as holistic entities and legislative change.

The practical relevance is aimed first and foremost at democracy aid providers that have an interest in consolidating ‘new’ legislatures. If institutionalization can occur even with weak ability of retention of MPs, then the attention of the democratic-aid providers should be concentrated on the other levels of the process: professionalization (donations and training for legislative staffs)/ helping to build an effective committee-system or a comprehensive catalogue of internal norms and procedures.

The selection of cases was mainly based on similarities: all the three countries have rates of legislative turnover constantly higher than what is perceived as the optimum: 30-35% (Best & Cotta 2002; Crowther & Matonyte 2007: 291) and are consolidated democracies and EU Member States.

Table 1: Percentages of Legislative Turnover

	Romania	Hungary	Estonia
1 st term	*	94.2	79.2
2 nd term	69.8	62.2	44.5
3 rd term	58.4	49.4	49.5
4 th term	56.5	34	80.2
5 th term	57.2	28.4	45
6 th term	55.1	*	*

The figures were taken/ computed by the author from the official websites of the three Parliaments.

The first section sets the theoretical framework, analyzing previous trends in legislative institutionalization scholarship and discussing the assumptions behind the conceptual choices made by the present paper. The main coordinates

of the research design (cases, data and indicators' operationalization) are included in the third section. The analysis starts with a discussion of the evolution of parliamentary factions since the firsts post-communist parliaments of the three countries. This is followed by a brief overview of the standing committees' general characteristics (number, composition, attributions) and of the core groups of committee leaders. The third part of the analysis compares the legislative turnover levels with the degrees of committee leadership incumbency in the same committees as well as generally. Next, I assessed the levels of continuity in the Assemblies leadership across the five terms. Finally, the conclusions provide answers to the puzzle and point to further directions of study.

1. Theoretical framework

Nelson Polsby was the first scholar to make the breakthrough and bring the concept of institutionalization in the study of legislatures. In a nutshell, he considered lengthy legislative careers and conversely low turnover rates to be a crucial positive factor in the process. Accordingly, stable and high incumbency rates were needed in order to create a pool of common legislative knowledge / expertise that will permit the MPs to standardize their activity and make decisions in a predictable way (Polsby 1968: 148). Also, continuity of careers was important because the entire architecture of internal differentiation was based on tenure-related arguments among which the most important was seniority. Polsby's model was intended to be universally true, and although it received many criticisms, subsequent cohorts of scholars applied the judgment of 'low turnover equals high institutionalization' for Western Europe, for the post-communist parliaments (Mansfeldova, Olson & Rakusanova 2004) as well as for Asian legislatures (Norton & Ahmed 1999).

The concept of 'Legislative turnover' has started its academic career as part and parcel of the theories of elite circulation (Putnam 1976: 68), living

between the boundaries of a paradox. The lower boundary implied that too little turnover equaled to an autarchic, rigid and narrow-minded political leadership, situation that would trigger, sooner or later, legitimacy deficits and possible turmoil produced by counter-elites.

Conversely, the upper boundary was also considered damaging since in the absence of a common pool of knowledge, ensured by years of experience, not only the quality of parliamentary work would be affected but this would also endanger the policy-making process. Seniority or incumbency supposedly brought reduction of information costs and creation of patterns of cooperation, while the permanent infusion of large cohorts of new-comers was associated with low party discipline and with clientelistic concerns of the freshmen towards their constituencies (Schepsle 1978).

The systematized concept of legislative turnover used here is defined as the variation in new members of the national legislatures from one election to another. Nevertheless, I follow a non-sequential approach, which means that a former MP returning in the Parliament after one or more electoral cycles is not considered to be a freshman. Since there were no shorter terms due to government demise in the analyzed cases suffices to use the total turnover, i.e., there is no need to find an average percentage of turnover for each year (Hibbing 1999: 685).

Legislative institutionalization is a concept much harder to grasp, mainly because there is neither a single agreed definition nor a single 'checklist' for it (Copeland & Patterson 1994: 53). For Nelson Polsby the three main characteristics of institutionalized Parliaments were 'boundedness', 'internal complexity' and 'automatic decision making'. The first referred to a separation – gaining autonomy from the environment and it had as indicators 'the stability of membership and the professionalization and persistence of House leadership roles' (Judge 2003: 503). Internal complexity was drawn from Durkheim's theory of specialization and it was believed to occur with an increase in the autonomy

and importance of committees and a growth in the resources MPs have at their disposal (Polsby 1968: 153). Finally, automatic decision making was thought to result from the application of universal principles', the 'development of committee seniority and the settlement of contested elections on merit' (Judge 2003: 503).

The indicators proposed by Polsby were very much criticized especially because they were so specific to the US Congress, that even state legislatures, not to mention Parliaments from other countries could not satisfy them. Even the House of Commons appeared not to be 'very institutionalized' (Hibbing 1988: 707). Polsby's measures were more or less abandoned, in accordance with a minimal agreed definition which vaguely encompassed notions like 'institutional autonomy and organizational complexity' (Sisson 1973: 18) or 'internal organizational development and external differentiation' (Judge 2003: 501).

I will not reproduce here the whole debate existing in the literature on institutionalization and its best operationalization. However, it is important to cite the distinction made by Peter Kopecky between direction (formal internal structures and organization) and degree of institutionalization or 'the capacity of parliament to reproduce itself and to resist social intervention' (2001: 14). This nuance is of great importance for the present project since it can be argued that at least one of those parliaments are institutionalized only in the first sense, while lacking to a greater or lesser extent the latter capacity.

Hypotheses: **H.1:** The higher the level of legislative turnover, the lower the level of professionalization and committee institutionalization.

H.2: The instability of parliamentary leadership should be a better predictor of low institutionalization than membership turnover

2. Methodology and Data

The main indicator used for legislative turnover is the reciprocal of the percentage of incumbents and former MPs managing to be re-elected.

Additionally I computed the percentage of retention (in consecutive and non-consecutive terms) of the 'core group' of legislators holding committee leadership positions and the degree of incumbency of Assembly leadership (Speaker, Deputy Speaker) across terms.

The indicators that will be used for legislative institutionalization are firstly, measures of committee-institutionalization: structure - permanent, 10 to 20 committees with maximum 35-40 people each are considered highly institutionalized (Olson & Crowther 2003: 33); party composition (preferable to be proportional with the shares of party groups) and autonomy (right to initiate legislation, right to amend bills, be consulted prior to floor).

Another indicator which I propose for institutionalization is assessing the stability of parliamentary factions across legislatures, as they are a key element in the successful integration of newcomers. This is an important step in going beyond the Congress-centered conceptualization of institutionalization.

The reason for which I excluded measures of professionalization such as: legislative salary, length of session or staff support services (Moncrief 2002: 59) from my analysis is the linear and uniform pattern which the three institutions followed in that respect. More clearly, they evolved from a nearly complete lack of resources in the first (two) mandate(s) (Ostrow 2002: 201; Ilonszki 1995: 198; Roper & Crowther 1998: 420), meaning no staffs for individual MPs, no copy machines, no offices and more important, little information available, to the 'glorious' and luxurious present¹.

The Hungarian Office of the National Assembly (which includes the General Secretariat, the General Economic Directorate and the Office for Foreign Relations) employs nowadays more than 600 people. Additionally 226 people

¹ The Romanian state reimburses the expenses of the parliamentary offices the MPs have in their constituency (rent, utilities, wages of the personnel, etc.). In addition to the monthly salary, the travel expenses (to the constituencies or abroad, when in official parliamentary delegation) and mobile phones bills are also reimbursed. The situation is almost perfectly similar with the other two Parliaments.

assist the parliamentary factions. In Romania the General Secretariat comprises five Departments (Economic, Administrative and Infrastructure, Technical, Legislative, and the Department for Parliamentary Studies) and seven Directions (Foreign Affairs, Transports, Internal Affairs, Public Relations, IT /Communications, Control and Human Resources). The total number of people that staff these services including those that help directly the MPs is 733. The Chancellery of the Riigikogu resembles the structures of the Romanian Chamber of Deputies: it has seven Departments and several others services and bureaus. These developments confirm perfectly John Hibbing's intuition: 'If money is available, these [professionalization] traits can be simply manufactured.' (1999: 162).

The data was collected from the official websites and printed records of parliaments and from previously published scholarly work. The original dataset I constructed includes all the MPs that have performed committee leadership roles in more than one term, from 1990 (Hungary)/ 1992 (Romania and Estonia) until nowadays. The dataset also contains all the MPs that acted as Speaker or Deputy Speaker in the mentioned time frame.

The leadership positions counted included the chairman and deputy-chairmen of each standing committee. Additionally, I also took into account the secretaries of the Romanian standing committees. This is because the powers held by the committee chairmen and his deputies in Hungary (*Resolution 46/1994: Standing Order no. 74*) and Estonia (*Riigikogu Rules of Procedure Act 2007*): agenda-setting, inviting government officials/ interest groups for hearings, dividing tasks etc. are exercised collectively in the Romanian case by the committee bureau composed in turn from the chairmen, deputy chairmen and secretary (*Standing Orders of the Chamber of Deputies 2004: art. 46*). The position of

committee secretary was present also in the first Hungarian legislature but it was then abolished.²

For reasons of symmetry I excluded the Romanian Senate from my analysis. The Chamber of Deputies alone is comparable to the other two institutions by being the decisional chamber and two and a half time larger than the Senate. There is a rather modest amount of MPs' circulation between the two chambers. Additionally, I considered the 1992-1996 term as the first Romanian Parliament because the mandate of the 1990-1992 House was limited to the drafting of new Constitution.

3. Analysis

3.1. Stability of Parliamentary Party Groups

Since all three assemblies are 'arena legislatures', to use Nelson Polby's term, it is quite straightforward to think that their stability is deeply connected with the stability of the party system. More than that, well-established Parliamentary Party Groups (PPGs) should be able to absorb successfully and socialize newcomers in their new roles (Heidar & Koole, 2000).

Table 2: PPG Changes Compared at the First Sitting

	Estonia	Hungary	Romania
1 st - 2 nd Parliament	5 entries 3 exits	0	2 exits 1 entry
2 nd - 3 rd Parliament	4 exits 1 exit	1 exit 1 entry	3 exits
3 rd - 4 th Parliament	1 exit 1 entry	2 exits	1 entry
4 th - 5 th Parliament	1 entry	1 entry	1 exits
Present 1 st - 5 th Parliament	1	4	4

² Only one Hungarian MP, secretary of a standing committee had another leadership position in a subsequent legislature.

By far the most fluid among the three was the Estonian party system and as a consequence there were 7 entries and 8 exits at the level of PPGs. One should, nevertheless keep in mind that 80% of these sweeping changes happened in the first three parliaments. The last two terms have witnessed a clear stabilization of factions, comparable to that in Hungary and Romania. However, an uncontested difference is given by the last row of the table which shows that only one Estonian faction (that of the Centre Party) has survived since the first Riigikogu, compared with four factions in both Hungary (Fidesz, MDF, MSZP and SZDSZ) and Romania (PDSR/ PSD, PD, PNL, UDMR).

At the other extreme, the Hungarian party system was for a long time considered the most institutionalized in Central and Eastern Europe (Enyedi & Toka 2007). Basically, for almost the entire post-communist period, two large parties, the conservative FIDESZ and the socialist MSZP governed alternatively in coalitions with their junior partners, MDF and SDSZ respectively. The two new factions' entries and three exits, presented in table two were of rather marginal forces.³

Romania is somewhere in between, situation reflected by the six factions' exits and two entries. However, the party instability of the first few years has almost completely vanished and since 2000 no new party has entered the Parliament, while only one of those already represented failed to pass the electoral threshold. If we assume that the parliamentary factions enjoy a noteworthy amount of institutional memory, then the Hungarian and Romanian first time MPs should generally find it easier to learn and become integrated in the legislative mechanism than their counterparts in Estonia. Nevertheless, further qualitative data about the perceived impact of the factions' socialization of their new members would be needed to strengthen the claim that, at a macro

³ However, the 2010 elections – not covered in the scope of this paper – brought a fundamental change as MDF and SDSZ did not manage to pass the threshold, being replaced by the ecologist LMP and the extreme-right Jobbik.

level, the stability of the Hungarian and Romanian PPGs make the respective legislatures more institutionalized.

3.2. Standing Committees and Their Leadership - General Features

Table 3 reflects the recent stabilization in number of committees for all three cases. Thus, it is clear that the Romanian Chamber of Deputies limited its committees at seventeen since 2000, while the Riigikogu is somewhat naturally constrained at a maximum of eleven standing committees given its dimension (101 MPs). In 2006 the Hungarian Assembly also restructured its committees, so as to make them more efficient and parallel to the configuration of ministries.

Table 3: Number of Standing Committees at the Beginning of the Sitting

	Estonia	Hungary	Romania
1 st Parliament	10	18	14
2 nd Parliament	9	17	15
3 rd Parliament	10	22	17
4 th Parliament	11	25	17
5 th Parliament	11	18	17

The standing orders of the three institutions generally prohibit the MPs to be members of more than one standing committee at a time. However there are exceptions from this rule in the case of the Estonian committee for European Union Affairs and for the IT & Communications, Equality of Chances between Men and Women and the Standing Orders committees in Romania. All MPs can serve simultaneously to their standing committee membership in an inquiry or select committee.

An important difference arises at the level of proportionality of membership in /and leadership of standing committees. While the Romanian (*Standing Orders of the Chamber of Deputies*, art. 61) and Hungarian Parliaments (*Resolution 46/1994: Standing Order nr. 33*) explicitly granted the PPGs the right

to negotiate and alter the distribution based in principle on proportionality, this possibility is not prescribed in the '*Riigikogu Rules of Procedure and Internal Rules Act*'. Moreover, the proportionality in assigning committee leadership positions represent a significant change compared to the 1990s Estonian legislatures which functioned in majoritarian connection with the coalition governments: 'From the leadership of the legislature to committee chair posts, to committee membership, to the floor, one's positioned in the Estonian Riigikogu is integrally linked to one's partisan affiliation. Either one is member of the coalition and has access to the leadership, the agenda setting and the rule formation, or one is in opposition and therefore is denied that access.' (Ostrow 2002: 9) The shift to proportionality has undoubtedly increased the institutionalization potential of the Estonian committees.

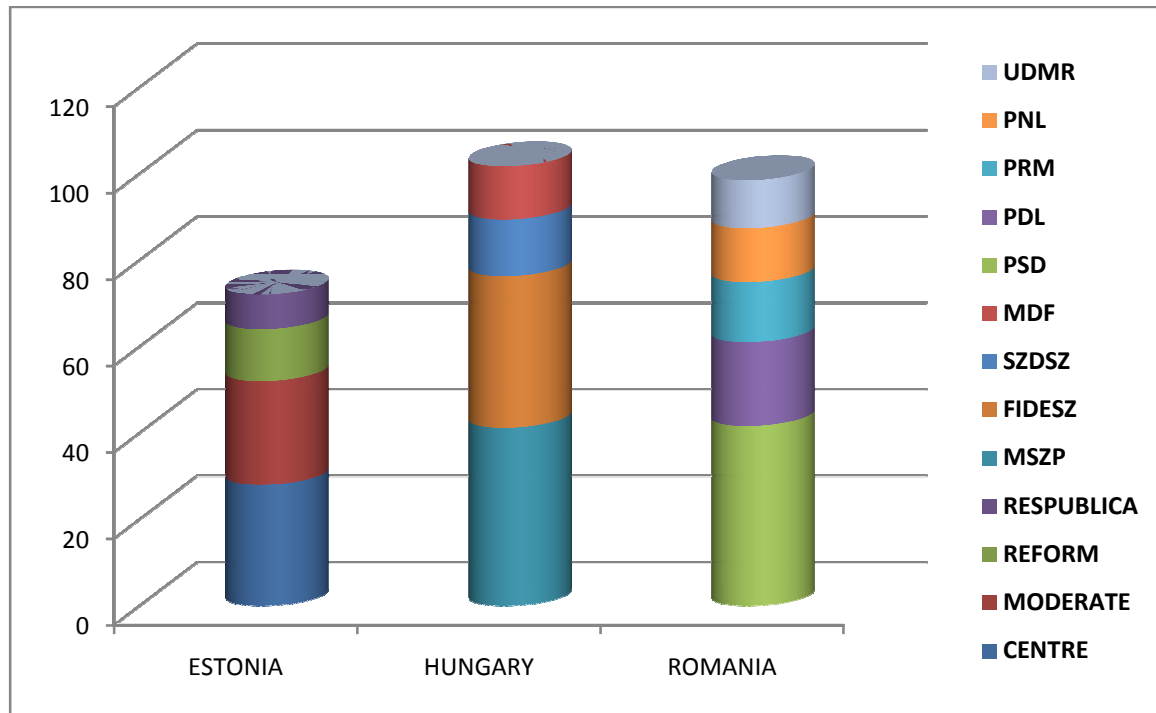
To continue with, the powers of the standing committees in the three legislatures are rather similar: they can propose laws; they examine and can amend initiatives; they have the right to supervise the activity of the government or of the specific ministry corresponding to their expertise (*Standing Orders of the Chamber of Deputies*, art. 61). This latter function is stressed more in the Hungarian and Estonian cases (*Resolution 46/1994: Standing Order nr. 29; Riigikogu Rules of Procedure Act*). All the above mentioned features correspond to a rather high level of committee institutionalization.

There were 130 committee leadership positions in the first four Estonian Parliaments, 439 in the same period in the Hungarian Országgyűlés and 310 in the Romanian Chamber of Deputies. Out of them, 25 Estonian MPs, 114 Hungarian MPs and 72 Romanian MPs had the privilege to act as chairman/vice-chairman or secretary in more than one legislature. Figure 4 below shows the party factions that promoted these committee elites (only those factions that included at least 8% of the committee leaders were included)

Exactly one third of the Hungarian parliamentary elite (38 out of 114 MPs) has chaired or vice-chaired committees in at least three different legislatures. The

corresponding percentage is 23% for Estonian (6 out of 26) and 18% for the Romanian case (13 out of 72 MPs).

Figure 1: Party Identity of Recurrent Committee Leaders



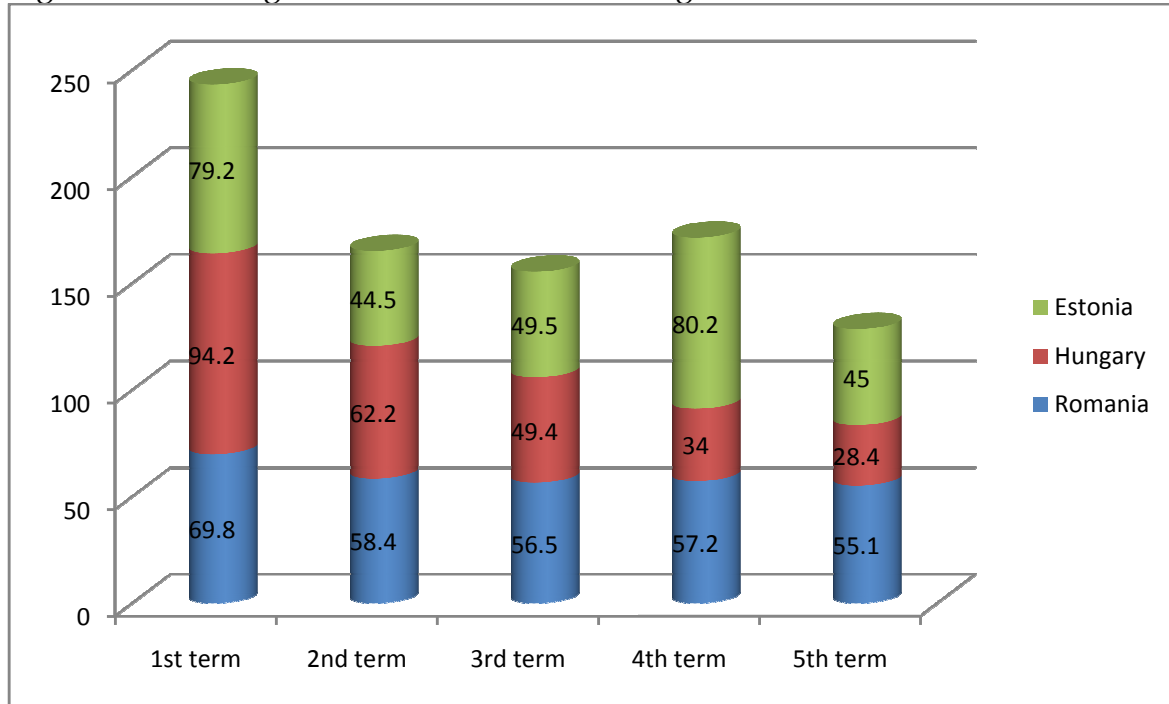
One can easily observe that the figures correspond to the images created through the discussion of the party systems stability and conversely, that of PPGs. On the one hand, the four factions present throughout the whole period in the Hungarian and Romanian assemblies gather 95% and 75%, respectively of all committee leaders. On the other hand, the Center Party faction in Estonia – the only PPG present in the 5 legislatures – includes 28% of the entire population.

3.3. Legislative Turnover and Committee Leadership Incumbency

For Hungary the legislative turnover has constantly decreased since 1994. In Estonia there were rather significant fluctuations, but the percentage was always

above 44%, while in Romania the group of newcomers has been constantly between 58 and 55%.

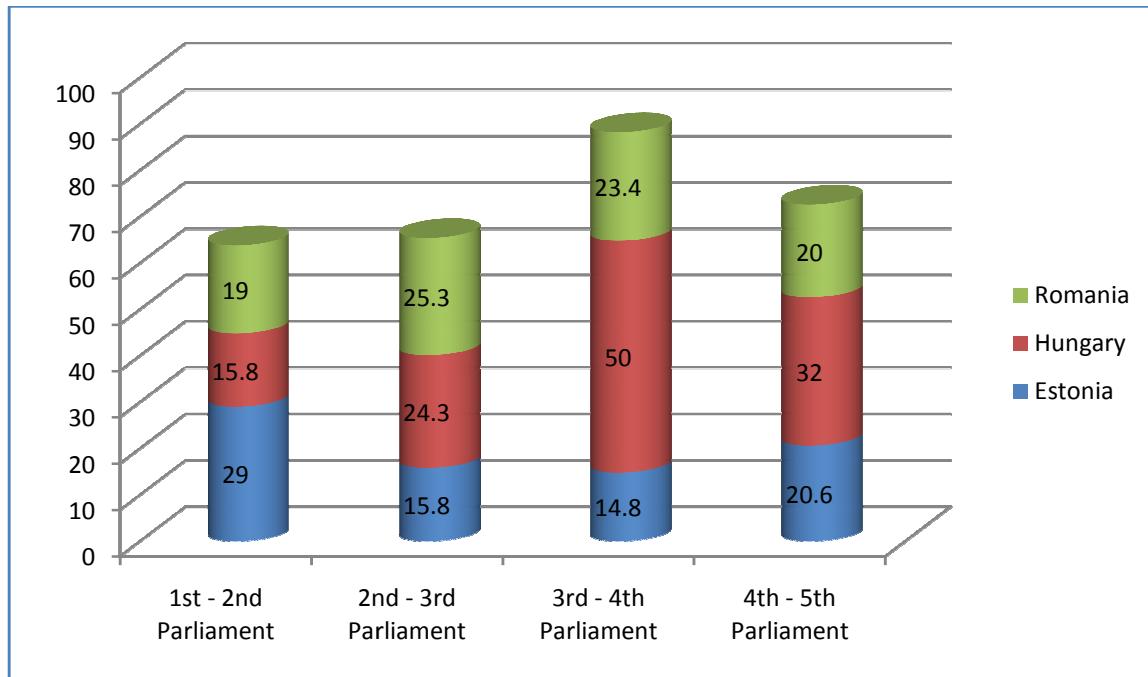
Figure 2: Percentages of Newcomers in each Legislature



A comparison of Figures 2 and 3/4 shows not only that the committee leaders are not insulated from the waves of turnover but, on the contrary, that the incumbency percentages follow closely the turnover trends.

This is most visible for the Hungarian Parliament. When in 1994, the turnout between the first and second term was 62% only approximately 16% of the committee leaders were retained and only 11.1% of them acted again as chairmen/ vice-chairmen of the same committees. A turnover drop to below 50% in 1998 was associated with an increased degree of committee leadership incumbency of almost 9 percentage points, out of which 7.5 percentage points served in the same committees. Finally, the further decreases in percentages of newcomers in 2002 and 2006 were immediately followed by extremely high degrees of leadership retention and incumbency, with a maximum of 50% (32.7 in the same committee) between the third and the fourth term.

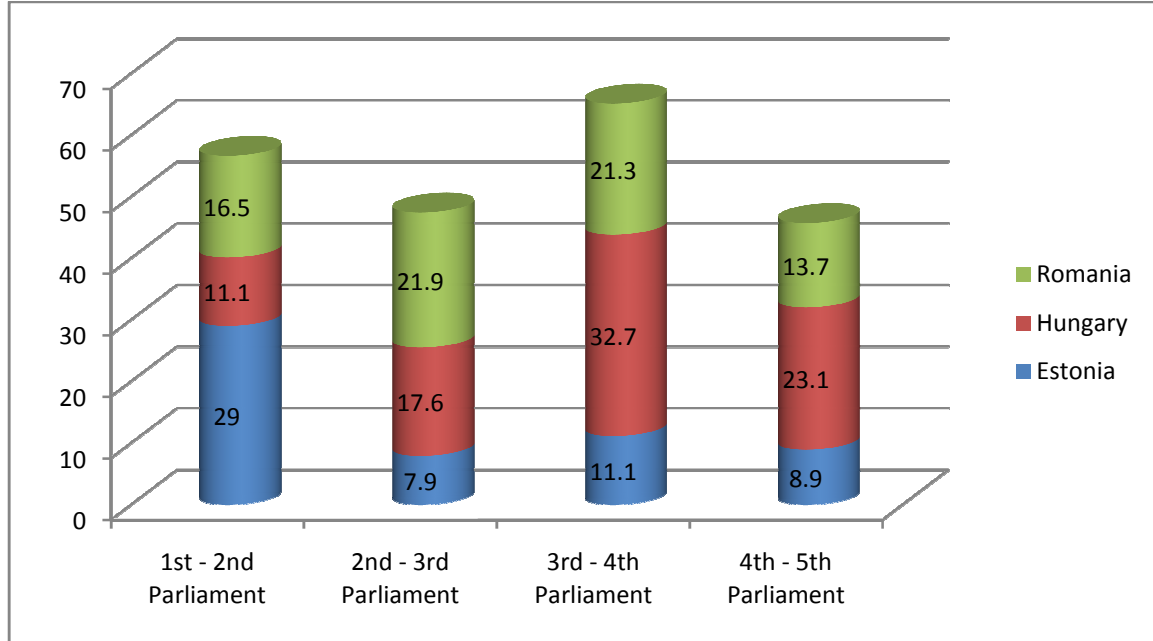
Figure 3: Percentages of Legislators Holding Successive Committee Leadership Positions



The similitude in turnover and committee leadership incumbency trends is also generally valid for the Estonian Riigikogu but with the exception of the first elections/ first two Parliaments. However, in all the other three instances, the degrees of incumbency are rather low – a maximum of 20.6%. Also, counter intuitively the lowest degree in incumbency (14.8%) does not correspond with the 2003 peak of turnover (80.2%) but precedes it.

Figure 4 below indicates that the Estonian use of committee leadership expertise is the most deficient among the three parliaments as only between 7 and 11% of the chairmen and vice-chairmen manage to play the same roles in the same domains for two consecutive mandates. This also means that the turnover of committee elites is even more pronounced than the already high degree of overall legislative turnover.

Figure 4: Percentages of Legislators Holding Successive Leadership Positions in the Same Committees



In the case of the Romanian Chamber of Deputies the turnover and the leadership incumbency levels are pretty constant. The only significant inconsistency is the slight turnover decrease and the sizeable disappearance of almost one third of the committee leaders that held positions in the same committees if we compare the third-fourth and fourth-fifth terms. This is probably explainable by the PRM's failure to re-enter Parliament, since their MPs represented the third largest groups of recurrent committee leaders as Figure 4 above also indicates.

3.4. Assembly Leadership Incumbency

Next, I compared the Parliamentary Boards of the three Assemblies as they belong naturally of the central core of legislative elites and such an assessment can improve the comprehensive picture of the legislatives' boundedness. For reasons of symmetry I only took into account the Speaker and the Deputy Speakers. Unlike the other two, the Permanent Bureau of the Romanian Chamber of Deputies includes also four secretaries and four quaestors (budget-officers).

While there are two and respectively, three Deputy Speakers for the Estonian and Hungarian Parliaments for each session, their number is four in the Romanian case.

Table 4: Speakers and Deputy Speakers' Incumbency

	Estonia	Hungary	Romania
1 st -2 nd Parliament	75	0	50
2 nd - 3 rd Parliament	60	14.3	22.2
3 rd – 4 th Parliament	50	50	33.3
4 th -5 th Parliament	12.5	25	30
Average	49.4	22.3	33.9

The formula applied was the same as in the case of committee leadership incumbency: first, I counted the number of people that acted in those roles in legislature 'T' and then I computed the total percentage of MPs that returned and played a similar role in legislature 'T+1'. Each MP was counted only once per term, even he acted in multiple sessions or roles.

One notices immediately the remarkable continuity for the Estonian Parliament leadership, especially in the first four terms. Actually, the Rigiikogu had only four Speakers and fifteen Deputy Speakers in thirty eight parliamentary sessions. Nevertheless, it would be still legitimate to doubt that this Assembly leadership continuity could have compensated significantly the above discussed high turnover levels of committee leaders and regular MPs.

The leadership of the Romanian Permanent Bureau was also remarkably stable, with an average incumbency of 33.9% across the five terms. There were in total five Speakers and twenty-seven Deputy Speakers. Surprisingly, the rate of Assembly leadership incumbency is the lowest for the Hungarian Parliament: 22.3%. There were six Speakers and twenty one Deputy Speakers - only two of the latter holding mandates in two different legislatures.

Conclusion

The major implications of this cross-national study which analyzed an original dataset are both theoretical and empirical. The main finding is that although much more institutionalized than in the 1990s the three legislatures still differ very much in their boundedness and in their ability to retain and use the expertise of experienced MPs.

At a theoretical level the paper emphasizes the importance for legislative institutionalization of three dimensions which were previously fairly ignored: the incumbency degree of committee elites, the stability of parliamentary party groups and the continuity of Assembly boards. All these are part of a model that can be easily replicated.

An empirical contribution was to show that in the three countries, committee incumbency trends follow closely overall legislative turnover, i.e., those parliamentarians that gathered committee expertise / experience are not more prone to be distributed in the same roles in subsequent legislatures than are the rest of the MPs to survive elections. In this sense, the present paper failed to corroborate one of John Hibbing's hypothesis about how could constantly large percentages of newcomers be compatible with an institutionalized Parliament.

The paper provided also an up-to-date evaluation of the degree of committee institutionalization in the three parliaments – the last contribution of this sort being the volume of David Olson and William Crowther (2002), which did not include Romania.

Probably the most important limitation of the present study comes from its inability to make causal claims. This inability is derived from the failure to identify a unique representative measure for institutionalization to serve as dependent variable/outcome and the same time not to include its predictors/conditions. This is not only a personal failure but it matches the central gap in the literature about legislative institutionalization. As long as this theoretical and

methodological problem is not solved, subsequent studies might find it more useful to abandon the attempt to measure legislative institutionalization and to concentrate on more graspable concepts like professionalization or committee institutionalization.

Another further direction of study would be to assess how these internal institutional evolutions influenced the relations with the political environment and more specifically, with the executive power. This would imply contrasting the organizational specialization and differentiation with the legislatures' ability 'to resist change' (Kopecky 2001: 14) inflicted by other political actors. At least for Romania, the Presidential vs. Parliament disputes are of high significance for the polity's future.

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