



Transformational Trends in the Development of Party Systems Amid Political Turbulence and the Structural Crisis of Representative Democracy

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ABSTRACT

In the article, we study the evolution of party systems in the period of modern political turbulence, accompanied by crisis phenomena of representative democracy, the growth of political polarization and the spread of the ideology of populism. The purpose of the article is to theoretically analyze the features of the evolution of party systems in conditions of political turbulence and crises of representative democracy. The article uses general scientific research methods, in particular analysis, systems approach, comparison, etc. Theoretical approaches to the analysis of party systems formulated in classical studies of political science are considered. It is determined that electoral volatility, fragmentation of the political space and a decrease in the level of trust in traditional party institutions are important indicators of the transformation of party systems. It is proven that in the 21st century, representative democracy is experiencing a complex crisis of legitimacy, which is manifested in the growing distance between citizens and political elites, the weakening of the social basis of traditional parties, and the spread of populism. The article emphasizes that populist parties actively use anti-elitist rhetoric, appeals to national identity, and emotional narratives, which allow them to mobilize voters in periods of economic and social instability. It is proven that in conditions of global political turbulence, the crisis of representative democracy acquires a systemic character and creates the prerequisites for the transformation of party systems. It is revealed that the key factors of such transformations are global socio-economic crises, international military conflicts, and the development of the information society and artificial intelligence technologies, which enhance the possibilities of using populism in the mobilization of the electorate.

KEYWORDS

party systems, representative democracy, political turbulence, populism, electoral volatility, political polarization, Russian-Ukrainian war.



Трансформаційні тенденції розвитку партійних систем в умовах політичної турбулентності та структурної кризи представницької демократії

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СТАТТЯ	АНОТАЦІЯ
<p>Дослідницька</p> <p>DOI: 10.70651/3041-2498/2026.2.06</p> <p>Отримана: 18.12.2025 р.</p> <p>Прийнята: 24.01.2026 р.</p> <p>Опублікована: 12.02.2026 р.</p> <p>Авторське право © 2026 авторів</p> <p>Цей твір ліцензовано на умовах Ліцензії Creative Commons «Із Зазначенням Авторства – Некомерційна 4.0 Міжнародна» (CC BY-NC 4.0).</p>	<p>У статті ми досліджуємо еволюцію партійних систем у період сучасної політичної турбулентності, що супроводжується кризовими явищами представницької демократії, зростанням політичної поляризації та поширенням ідеології популізму. Мета статті полягає у теоретичному аналізі особливостей еволюції партійних систем в умовах політичної турбулентності та криз представницької демократії. У статті використано загальнонаукові методи дослідження, зокрема аналізу, системного підходу, порівняння тощо. Розглянуто теоретичні підходи до аналізу партійних систем, сформульовані у класичних дослідженнях політичної науки. Визначено, що важливими індикаторами трансформації партійних систем виступають електоральна волатильність, фрагментація політичного простору та зниження рівня довіри до традиційних партійних інститутів. Доведено, що у XXI столітті представницька демократія переживає комплексну кризу легітимності, яка проявляється у зростанні дистанції між громадянами та політичними елітами, послабленні соціальної основи традиційних партій і поширенні популізму. У статті підкреслюється, що популістичні партії активно використовують антиелітарну риторику, апеляцію до національної ідентичності та емоційні наративи, що дозволяє їм мобілізувати виборців у періоди економічної та соціальної нестабільності. Доведено, що в умовах глобальної політичної турбулентності криза представницької демократії набуває системного характеру й створює передумови для трансформації партійних систем. Виявлено, що ключовими чинниками таких трансформацій виступають світові соціально-економічні кризи, міжнародні військові конфлікти та розвиток інформаційного суспільства і технологій штучного інтелекту, які посилюють можливості використання популізму у мобілізації електорату.</p>



КЛЮЧОВІ СЛОВА

партійні системи, представницька демократія, політична турбулентність, популізм, електоральна волатильність, політична поляризація, російсько-українська війна.

1. Introduction

The current stage of development of European political systems is characterized by a high level of dynamism and instability. On the one hand, this is due to internal socio-economic transformations. On the other hand, foreign policy influence plays an important role. Over the past ten years, party systems in European countries have increasingly functioned in conditions of political turbulence, which manifests itself in the growth of political polarization, increasing the influence of populist parties, and the fragmentation of the party field and the transformation of traditional ideological dividing lines. These processes intensified especially noticeably after the start of the pandemic crisis, and subsequently intensified due to the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war. Political instruments of influence, in particular social networks, which have an unprecedentedly significant impact on the mobilization of the electorate and are as convenient and budget-friendly as possible to use, also play an important role.

On the other hand, several European countries, including the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, often use the Russian-Ukrainian war to reboot the party system. An example of this is the election campaigns of Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, etc. As we can see, the topic of war, combined with economic difficulties, energy crisis and social security problems, is increasingly used by political parties as a tool for influencing the electorate. As a result, there is a regrouping of political forces, a transformation of party rhetoric and the adaptation of party ideologies to new socio-political circumstances. Such a change requires a thorough scientific understanding, as it directly affects the stability of democratic institutions, the nature of the formation of European governments and the effectiveness of political governance.

2. Literature Review

In general, classical approaches to the analysis of party systems were formulated in the works of Sartori, who defined the party system as a set of interdependent actors, within which the behavior of each party is a function of the actions of other political forces [15]. In further research, this approach was supplemented by an analysis of the institutional conditions for the functioning of parties. In particular, Mainwaring and Scully emphasized the importance of the level of institutionalization of party systems, which is determined by the stability of party competition, the rootedness of parties in society, and the legitimacy of political institutions [6]. An important factor in the evolution of party systems is the growth of populist movements and crisis phenomena in representative democracy [3; 16]. This trend is confirmed by the research of Norris and Inglehart, who associate the growth of support for populist parties with cultural and social changes that form a sense of threat to traditional values and political institutions [9]. In turn, Kriesi et al. focus on the transformation of political conflicts in Europe, where new dividing lines are associated with the processes of globalization, migration and cultural polarization [5]. These processes are often accompanied by an increase in electoral volatility, which, according to Pedersen, is a key indicator of the instability of party systems [11].

Modern research also pays considerable attention to the crisis phenomena of democracy and their impact on party systems. Bermeo notes that democratic retreat in the modern world occurs mainly due to the gradual erosion of institutions, and not due to abrupt authoritarian coups [1]. A similar position is expressed by Wiatr, who associates the crisis of democracy with the weakening of trust in political institutions and the transformation of the mechanisms of political representation [20].

The Ukrainian context of the transformation of the party system is also actively studied in domestic political science. Thus, Romaniuk considers the crisis of political parties in Ukraine as a consequence of structural changes in the political environment and weak institutionalization of the party system [13]. Kopynets' research analyzes the impact of European trends in the development of party systems on the evolution of Ukrainian political competition, emphasizing the role of integration processes and institutional reforms [4]. In turn, Yuriev focuses on the processes of political structuring of the Ukrainian parliament after the 2019 elections, which became an important stage in the transformation of the country's party system [21].

3. Problem Statement

The purpose of the study is to theoretically analyze the features of the evolution of party systems in the conditions of political turbulence and crises of representative democracy.

4. Methods and Materials

In our work, we used general scientific research methods that allow for a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of party systems during periods of political turbulence. For example, the application of a systematic approach allowed us to consider the party system as a set of interrelated political actors, the interaction of which determines the mechanisms of power formation. The method of analysis made it possible to carry out a thorough study of the features of evolutionary and transformational changes in the party system in the last ten years. The application of the comparative method allowed us to compare the evolution of party systems in different European countries in conditions of political turbulence. Thus, we were able to identify common trends in the formation of populism, as well as determine the specifics of the impact of crisis phenomena, for example, the COVID-19 pandemic, the energy crisis and the Russian-Ukrainian war, on the transformation of political processes in different political systems.

5. Results and Discussion

The functioning of a democratic society presupposes the presence of a developed party system, within which political parties, representing the interests of different social groups, fight for power in accordance with the existing rules of political competition. If democratization as a process means the appearance, development and disappearance of political actors within the framework of an open political struggle, then the institutionalization of the party system is associated with the stabilization of these processes, the formation of repetitive models of interaction and the consolidation of competition norms. It is the presence of institutional sustainability that creates the prerequisites for the consolidation of democracy, especially in transitional states [18]. Parties perform a key function of political representation, articulating and combining interests, mobilizing voters and forming a choice. In general, there are two approaches to the theoretical understanding of the party system. The first focuses on the quantitative and structural characteristics of parties (their size, organizational capacity, and level of institutionalization). The second one interprets the party system as a network interaction formed through competition and cooperation. In our opinion, the most comprehensive definition of the party system belongs to Sartori, who considered it as a set of interdependent actors, in which the behavior of each party is a function of the actions of the others [15].

However, in the XXI century, representative democracy is experiencing a systemic crisis at the global and national levels. Approaches to the interpretation of the crisis of democracy range from a moderate analysis of institutional dysfunctions to radical denials of the democratic model itself [20]. Here, in our opinion, it is worth mentioning the works of F. Carsten and Co. In their opinion, the mechanism of electoral competition stimulates political actors to compete primarily through the sphere of redistribution of resources, which contributes to an increase in public spending, the expansion of public administration and the strengthening of regulatory control over various spheres of public life. However, the influence of real citizens is rather doubtful, because policy-making increasingly takes place through interest groups that really influence the masses. Despite the distinctly polemical nature of this position and its remoteness from mainstream democratic theories, it is symptomatic of the current state of public discourse. Such arguments reflect the deeper legitimization crisis of representative democracy, which manifests itself in the growing distrust of parliamentary and party institutions and in the perception of the democratic procedure as a formal mechanism that guarantees neither the full participation of citizens nor the proper protection of their individual autonomy [2].

A generalized description of the crisis of representative democracy is contained in the Resolution of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe "Democracy in Europe: Crisis and Prospects" (2010). The resolution outlines a number of symptoms indicating a gradual decline in the real participation of citizens in decision-making processes, an increase in the distance between voters and representative institutions, and the erosion of trust in political parties and parliaments. The common

denominator of these manifestations is the transformation of democracy from the real practice of participation into a declarative principle – power on behalf of the people without proper involvement of the people themselves [10]. Among the structural factors of the crisis of representative democracy, researchers name disillusionment with the neoliberal economic model, growing socio-economic inequality and the phenomenon of relative deprivation. The deepening crisis of representative democracy creates a favorable environment for the spread of populist movements that combine anti-elite rhetoric with an appeal to personalized strong leadership and a distinct skepticism of liberal institutions [4]. Populism in this context appears not only as a protest against specific political elites, but as a broader challenge to the rule of law and the mechanisms of institutional representation [19]. The radicalization of political discourse was noticeable even in the first period of D. Trump's presidency, which actualized the question of the border between electoral revolt and systemic transformation of the democratic order. Populist actors form emotionally charged narratives, appealing to images of the "real people", "indigenous majority", "lost greatness of the state", social justice, or economic security. Such slogans "let's make them together", "regain control", "make the country great again" combine incompatible elements: national mobilization, socio-economic promises and moral polarization of society [17].

Populist slogans are emotional, which, in our opinion, forms the illusion of simplicity of decision-making in the individual, while masking the complexity of the issue itself, for example, as it sounded in V. Zelensky's theses: "maybe you just need to stop shooting", in response to the endless hostilities in 2019. In our opinion, the basis of successful populist strategies is the skillful use of modern socio-political challenges: economic instability, fear of losing jobs, concern about migration processes, a sense of loss of national sovereignty, cultural anxiety about the transformation of traditional values, growing social inequality, and distrust of political transparency. In a situation of uncertainty, some citizens tend to pin their hopes on personalized leadership, which promises simple, quick and decisive solutions at the same time. Identification with the image of "one's representative" in big politics forms a sense of collective strength and compensation for the previous experience of exclusion from the decision-making process [21].

As Mair notes, the crisis of representative democracy is associated with the gradual "washing out" of the social base of traditional parties and the growing distance between elites and citizens [7]. In our opinion, this gap is an ideal opportunity for the "flourishing" of parties with populist ideology. On the one hand, there is probably not a single politician today who would not turn to populism, but in the last ten years, the world has resembled the "power of populists". The most dangerous, in our opinion, is that populism, as a manipulative technology, quite successfully uses the confrontation between "us" and "them". This allows creating artificial redistributions in the context of the "real people" and the "corrupt elite", building key messages around the problems of emigration, the common EU policy, etc.

In 2019, it was possible to track several transformations in the party systems of European countries. For example, the Polish Law and Justice party mobilized its electorate through the active use of demographic, socio-economic and security narratives. The experience of Ukrainian elections has shown that the party system can be rebooted through personalized slogans, "each of us is the president", "each of us is Ukraine". Combined with the propaganda influence of the Russian Federation to create a negative image of the previous president based on hatred for him, the election resulted in a mono-majority in parliament, thus creating a complete reboot of the party system. In the UK, the elections have completed the phase of Brexit polarization, creating a new configuration of party competition. In general, all these cases show signs of high electoral volatility – an indicator traditionally associated with the crisis of party institutionalization [11].

Another, no less important factor in the crisis of representative democracy was the COVID-19 pandemic. Many studies actually pointed to the likely development of populism and the transition of countries to a more closed type. As an example, Poland's adoption of a law on the unconstitutionality of abortion, under the guise of combating the demographic crisis. Existing research shows that the higher the cultural anxiety and sense of loss of control over life, the greater the support for populist ones in society [7]. The pandemic, the energy crisis, and inflationary pressures have exacerbated precisely these sentiments. Already in 2022–2024, right-wing populist parties have significantly strengthened in several European countries. The collected analytical reports recorded an increase in the share of votes for populist forces in the 2024 European Parliament elections, where right-wing and Eurosceptic parties significantly expanded their representation [14; 18]. Another significant factor that influenced the spread of populist tendencies, in our opinion, is the Russian-Ukrainian war. Using populism, political

leaders of many countries have successfully used anti-Ukrainian narratives in their election campaigns. For example, in Poland, the issue of the Volyn tragedy of the Second World War was raised again and again, which especially touches on the part of the collective trauma that connects Ukrainians and Poles, exposing the latter as victims of “unjust terror”.

It is worth noting that the modern party system in Poland is formed under the influence of both internal social changes and geopolitical processes that are closely related to the United States and EU policy. One of the noticeable trends is the strengthening of political polarization, which manifests itself in the deepening of ideological and value differences between supporters of different political forces. At the same time, there is a fragmentation of the political space associated with the emergence of new parties and movements that seek to represent the interests of certain social groups. In such conditions, traditional political forces are forced to adapt their programs to unstable electoral expectations [20].

In our opinion, an important challenge for Polish democracy remains the instability of the political participation of citizens, which can increase distrust in the institutions of representative power. Against this background, the role of populist rhetoric is growing, appealing to the emotional moods of voters and building political mobilization on various oppositions of “us” and “them”. As an example, we can cite the results of the 2023 parliamentary elections, which demonstrated competition between supporters of the conservative party and the liberal-pro-European opposition.

The return to power of “Smer-SD” under the leadership of R. Fico in Slovakia may indicate a certain shift towards populist discourse, using narratives of sovereignty. The success of the Smer-SD party in the parliamentary elections, in our opinion, should be viewed through the prism of several interrelated factors that determined its electoral attractiveness in a period of political instability. “The true will of the people”. Within the framework of this rhetoric, elements of national discourse and criticism of the political elite were actively used. On the other hand, within the country itself, populist narratives were complemented by criticism of liberal values and certain social groups, in particular the LGBT community and national minorities, which made it possible to mobilize the conservative-minded part of the electorate. An important element of this strategy was also the ideological rethinking of the party’s position in the European political space. In the election rhetoric of R. Fico emphasized the need for a “Slovak version of social democracy”, which would be based primarily on national interests and a more autonomous foreign policy towards the institutions of the European Union. This positioning combined socio-economic elements of traditional left-wing rhetoric with theses of sovereignty and euroscepticism, which actually allowed the party to expand its electoral base at the expense of voters on the right political spectrum [12].

The current state of the Russian-Ukrainian war also had a noticeable impact on the mobilization of the electorate. Quite often, SMER’s rhetoric contained narratives that actually repeated the theses declared by the Russian Federation regarding the causes of the war. R. Fico, in his speeches, repeatedly criticized the EU, arguing that their strategy of helping and supporting Ukraine was not aimed at finding ways to end the conflict. This made it possible, in the end, to lay down the party’s course towards a somewhat more “balanced” foreign policy. In the context of SMER, it opposed further military assistance to Ukraine, insisting that the EU should first and foremost mediate a peaceful settlement. This position, in our opinion, allowed SMER to appeal to voters who are tired of the war and skeptical about Europe’s active participation in supporting Ukraine [12].

Similar trends were observed in Romania, where the far-right party “Alliance for the Unification of Romanians” tried to mobilize the electorate through national rhetoric and criticism of military support for Ukraine. However, despite an active campaign, pro-European political forces managed to maintain a parliamentary majority. After the elections to the European Parliament in 2024, the position of the French right-wing radical party “National Rally” led by J. Bardell also noticeably strengthened. We are seeing a change in party rhetoric from openly pro-Russian sympathies to a more cautious formula of support for Ukraine, which, in particular, involves assistance without direct participation of France in the war. It is also worth citing the example and results of the parliamentary elections in the Czech Republic in 2025, as a result of which we see that the position of the populist party ANO 2011, led by A. Babiš is strengthening in the direction of Euroscepticism. For example, in the election program of ANO 2011, much attention was paid to socio-economic issues: restoring economic growth, limiting energy prices, lowering the retirement age, and reducing corporate taxes. with criticism of certain areas of the European Union’s policy, in particular the European Green Deal and migration policy. A. Babiš’s election rhetoric was largely based on the thesis that the economic difficulties of the Czech Republic are associated with excessive budget expenditures of the center-right government on foreign policy

priorities, in particular support for Ukraine. In the foreign policy discourse, the leader of ANO 2011 stated the need to revise the volume of military aid to Ukraine, and also questioned the feasibility of increasing defense spending to the level of 5% of GDP within NATO.

The victory of ANO 2011 against the backdrop of the weakening of the positions of the ruling SPOLU coalition reflects the growing public dissatisfaction with the economic situation and indicates that for a significant part of the Czech electorate, domestic socio-economic problems are a priority over foreign policy issues. At the same time, the election results demonstrated a deepening of political polarization in society, which increasingly clearly outlines the competition between populist forces with elements of illiberal rhetoric and parties defending the pro-Western democratic course [8]. This trend is typical not only for the Czech Republic, but also for the wider region of Central and Eastern Europe. The weakening of traditional centrist forces is accompanied by the strengthening of political actors who actively use the topics of economic instability, energy crisis and the Russian-Ukrainian war in election communication.

6. Conclusions

Summing up, we would like to note that in the context of global political turbulence and global uncertainty, the crisis of democracy looks quite natural. The most threatening, in our opinion, is that the more the world is drawn into international conflicts and crises, the more favorable the environment for the reboot of the party system towards authoritarianism is formed. We have identified several key factors that contribute to such a reset. First, global socio-economic crises, like the COVID pandemic – 2019. For societies from more closed, often fundamentalist states, this was a period of the heyday of populism and the ability to implement tougher laws, thereby undermining the principles of democracy. Secondly, international military conflicts, primarily the Russian-Ukrainian war. The consequences of this confrontation not only form new challenges and threats to the world, but also allow the use of “economic”, “emigration” and other narratives that are aimed at mobilizing the population. Thirdly, it is the constant development of the information society and AI, which brings communication between populist leaders and their electorate to a completely different, horizontal plane.

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