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Opening the box of parties and party systems under autocratization: evidence from Turkey

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ABSTRACT

Party institutionalization (PI) and party system institutionalization (PSI) are critical for processes of democratization and democratic consolidation, yet their impact and relationship have not been explored under conditions of autocratization. How does autocratization relate to party and party system stability, and how does that link manifest itself? To answer those questions, we draw evidence from Turkey to demonstrate that when autocratization occurs, stabilization at the systemic level can go hand in hand with declining levels of PI. We also conceptualize the process of stabilization at the systemic level alongside unit-level de-institutionalization as a form of systemic ossification. Ossified party systems appear stable but are continuously subject to the possibility of de-stabilization, or even implosion, due to the under-institutionalization of incumbent parties. Driving factors of such (de)stabilization are: (1) the increasing unevenness of party competition and (2) increasing levels of societal and political polarization resulting from autocratization.

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Introduction

In recent decades, the decline in democratic standards has become a global phenomenon, sometimes labelled the third wave of autocratization (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019), coupled with a lively debate on conceptualizing and understanding contemporary forms of de-democratization. Several concepts have been put forward, with ‘democratic backsliding and autocratization’¹ prominent among them (e.g., Bermeo 2016; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Haggard and Kaufman 2021), all of which seek to account for the ways in which democratic institutions continue to exist in the paper but lose their substance, hollowing out democracy. Such forms of autocratization force scholars to revisit the conceptual toolboxes developed to understand regime change.

Political parties are among the most prominent organizational units in need of conceptual revisiting. Nearly all contemporary cases of reverse regime trajectories occur under functioning, albeit different, party systems and political parties. While there is widespread consensus on the positive contribution of both party level and systematic level institutionalization in assisting democratization and democratic

consolidation (e.g., Mainwaring and Scully 1995; cf. Casal Bértoa 2016), there is lingering uncertainty on the relationship between unit level institutionalization and systemic level stabilization, especially under the process of autocratization. Some emphasize, without taking into account the context of regime change, the causal relationship between the two and therefore use them interchangeably (e.g., Mainwaring and Scully 1995; Meleshevich 2007), while others suggest they be treated separately (e.g., Randall and Svåsand 2002).

In this article, we build on recent contributions to the conceptualization and measurement of both party and party system institutionalization (PI and PSI). We demonstrate that when autocratization occurs, stabilization at the systemic level can go hand in hand with a declining level of PI. Delineating such cases of system-level stabilization as instances of party system institutionalization leads to important problems, both conceptual and empirical. First, focusing on systemic stabilization and attaching the PSI label without scrutinizing unit-level institutionalization leads to conceptual stretching of the former. Further, such usage leads to false conclusions regarding the causal relationship between PSI levels and democracy.

To avoid such pitfalls, we analyse systemic stabilization by focusing on unit-level institutionalization. This, we argue, will allow us to understand the true causes of systemic (de)stabilization when autocratization occurs. Contrary to existing assumptions on the relationship between PSI and PI, unit-level institutionalization is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for stabilization at the systemic level. Following Rodriguez and Rosenblatt (2018), we conceptualize the combination of systemic stabilization and the de-institutionalization of incumbent parties as depicting ossified rather than institutionalized or under/over-institutionalized party systems.

This is far from a semantic differentiation and carries major empirical implications. We argue and demonstrate by use of our empirical case that ossified party systems appear stable but are continuously subject to the possibility of de-stabilization, or even implosion, due to the under-institutionalization of incumbent parties. The extent to which such a systemic de-stabilization occurs is linked to two main factors. First, the extent to which the incumbent party is in a position to ‘deliver the goods.’ incumbent failure in policy delivery can easily lead to a partial de-stabilization through vote shifts to opposition parties. Second, performance failure and the loss of the incumbent party’s invincibility foster elite defections. These can lead to the establishment of new parties and, therefore, systemic fragmentation and de-stabilization. In other words, the stakes are high, and through this article, we aim at reconnecting the literature on parties and party systems on the one hand and de-democratization (or autocratization) on the other. After all, the latter is on the rise in different parts of the world, and a more careful analysis of the phenomenon’s dynamics is warranted.

To empirically substantiate the above, we focus on the case of Turkey. Turkey was in the process of democratization, which was boosted by the European Union enlargement process in the early 2000s. Nevertheless, Turkey has by now turned into a paradigmatic case of autocratization. Some studies that focus on the party system point to a stabilization phase and an increasing level of systemic institutionalization (see, Özbudun 2013; Öney and Selck 2016). Others, through a different conceptualization, identify the Turkish case as a non-institutionalized party system (see, Yardımcı-Geyikci 2018). We draw on the Turkish case to empirically substantiate our theoretical argument: Turkey does not constitute a case of existing or evolving party system institutionalization.

Further, Turkey demonstrates that PSI and incumbent party de-institutionalization can go hand in hand under processes of autocratization.

Apart from its contribution to the literature on the relationship between PI and PSI, this article also contributes to the literature on contemporary forms of reverse regime transitions. Some of the existing literature offers valuable classificatory accounts of country-specific cases (for Hungary see, Boogards 2018; for Turkey see, Esen and Gumuscu 2016). Others emphasize certain mechanisms of autocratization, such as executive aggrandizement and state capture, but only briefly mention the role of parties or how this process affects political parties (e.g., Coppedge 2017; Hanley and Vachudova 2018). Some focus on party systemic features and dynamics of polarization without problematizing individual parties (e.g., Enyedi 2016; McCoy and Somer 2019; Haggard and Kaufman 2021, 14–17) or focus only on incumbent parties' organizational features (e.g., Baykan 2018; Yardımcı-Geyikçi and Yavuziyılmaz 2020). Overall, the question of what happens to party systems and individual parties during autocratization remains unanswered. Through both a systemic and individual level analysis, this article aims to fill this gap in the literature.

The present article is structured as follows. Firstly, we review the scholarly debate on PSI conceptualization and introduce the indicators used in the study. The second section focuses on the level of PSI in Turkey,² while the third analyses the institutionalization level of the incumbent Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* - AKP). The fourth section reviews the debate regarding individual-level party de-institutionalization and systemic institutionalization before introducing the concept of an ossified party system and the process of ossification. The final section summarizes the main findings and outlines avenues for further research.

Institutionalization of individual parties and party systems: moving beyond the unit jump fallacy

PI and PSI have been widely employed to understand the organizational evolution of political parties and explain important characteristics of party systems (e.g., Panebianco 1988; Mainwaring and Scully 1995). Despite their extensive usage, there is lingering uncertainty regarding both the conceptualization and operationalization of these concepts (for a review of the concepts, see Casal Bértoa 2016). To start with, due to problems with conceptualization, PI and PSI have often been used interchangeably. This has been mostly the result of the assumption that they are linked and, in most cases, correlated (e.g., Mainwaring and Scully 1995; Meleshevich 2007; Hicken and Kuhonta 2011). The assumption has therefore been that a system's constitutive part (political parties) translates to the institutionalization of the party system or that an institutionalized party system presupposes unit-level institutionalization. This erroneous approach has been described as a unit jump fallacy (Yardımcı-Geyikçi 2015).

Other parts of the literature have been more careful regarding PI and PSI treatment. Markowski (2001, 56) argues that the relationship between the two should not be considered unilinear, simple, and deterministic. Randall and Svåsand (2002, 8) assert that while closely related, 'individual party and party system institutionalization are neither the same thing nor necessarily and always mutually compatible.' They suggest that the two 'could be at odds', especially in new democracies. More recently, studies

focusing on the individual party level also treat the two concepts separately (e.g., Yardımcı-Geyikçi 2015; Casal Bértoa 2016).

The existing PSI scholarship follows the seminal study of Mainwaring and Scully (1995), in which the authors introduced the concept. According to their definition, an institutionalized party system 'is one in which a stable set of parties interact regularly in stable ways' and entails the following dimensions: (1) regular patterns of inter-party competition; (2) strong party roots in society; (3) electoral and partisan legitimacy; (4) solid party organizations (Mainwaring and Scully 1995, 5, 14).

Subsequent applications of Mainwaring and Scully's (1995) framework relied on the substantive meaning of PSI, which is the notion of stability. That literature either discards some of the dimensions in the original conceptualization or subsumes them under a single measure. For example, Kuenzi and Lambright (2001) relied on the first three dimensions to systematically analyse the level of PSI in Africa and did not include solid party organizations. Lindberg (2007) measured the level of institutionalization with a sole focus on inter-party competition patterns, suggesting that the most important aspect of PSI is stability and interaction among political parties. In their study on PSI in Asia, Hicken and Kuhonta (2011) also focus on the first dimension and measure PSI through aggregate volatility scores for each country. Overall, the existing scholarship either uses the first dimension and indicators, such as electoral volatility and the number of new and old parties, to measure PSI or opts for aggregate PSI scores through linear additive measures of all or some of the four dimensions. Both strategies conflate individual party-specific attributes with systemic ones and fail to offer a conceptual base that scrutinizes the exact relationship between PI and PSI. They, therefore, amplify the unit jump fallacy problem.

More recently, scholars have scrutinized these two strategies of conceptualization/measurement and the 'normative preference for stability' as the main component of systemic institutionalization (e.g., Luna 2014; Rodriguez and Rosenblatt 2018). Such a critique allows us to unpack the concept of PSI and PI. For instance, Luna (2014) provided a seminal critique of the original PSI conceptualization and its applications by scrutinizing the causal relationship between the different dimensions of PSI and the utility of using a single indicator (volatility) for measuring PSI levels. By unpacking the two dimensions (stability in patterns of inter-party competition and societal rootedness of political parties), Luna (2014) shows that each dimension, while potentially in correlation, can evolve in different directions, which makes them 'distinct and empirically separable' (421). Such an approach points to the importance of analysing different PSI dimensions separately, including unit-level institutionalization.

Other studies further problematized the notion of stability by analysing the possible causes of systemic stability. Rodriguez and Rosenblatt (2018) suggest that conventional approaches emphasizing electoral stability at the systemic level ignore the underlying nature of that stability. They argue that systemic stability is an outcome of two different scenarios: the lack of any challenge towards the existing party system emanating from society and/or an effective response of political organizations to such challenges (adaptability) (Rodriguez and Rosenblatt 2018, 2). They further argue that an institutionalized party system is one that generates stability through effective adaptation to societal and economic challenges, either through the incorporation of new parties or through the old parties' ability to channel new demands (Rodriguez and Rosenblatt 2018). A logical

corollary is that party systems that acquire stability through exclusion or repression should not be considered institutionalized since they are stable so long as they maintain their capacity to repress and/or exclude. Therefore, Rodriguez and Rosenblatt define PSI as a process of stabilization of inter-party interaction based on the systemic ability to adapt to exogenous challenges. They distinguish between stability and incorporation: the first is defined as the stability of competing parties, which entails parties with stable party organizations. Rodriguez and Rosenblatt minimally operationalize this by party age weighted by the combined proportion of House (Parliament) seats held by all parties that have at least 5% of seats. The second dimension, incorporation, involves electoral turnout and barriers, which entails power distribution, corruption, and restrictions on party formation.

Notwithstanding its benefits for understanding the relationship between PI and PSI, Rodriguez and Rosenblatt's (2018) conceptual typology falls into the same trap as previously discussed: it does not scrutinize institutionalization at the unit level. Individual political parties' votes and their organizational stability should not be taken for granted; the root causes of individual party stabilization should be analysed to better grasp the relationship between systemic stability and individual party institutionalization. The challenge to systemic stability, while potentially emanating from societal demands for change and an inability to address those, can also stem from political parties themselves, the constitutive units of the party system. A detailed analysis of individual parties is thus necessary to examine and evaluate the 'quality' of party systemic stability.

Through the empirical case of Turkey, we demonstrate the utility of an approach that scrutinizes the sources of incumbent party stability under autocratization. We contend that in such cases, rather than conceptualizing party system stabilization as institutionalization, such stabilization is, in fact, indicative of party systemic ossification.

Party system institutionalization

Recalling Giovanni Sartori's (2005, 39) definition of a party system as a 'system of interactions resulting from inter-party competition,' and Huntington's (1968) definition of institutionalization as a process of stabilization and value infusion, we define PSI as a process of stabilization of interaction among political parties and increasing party legitimacy at the societal level. Such a definition allows us to differentiate between PI and PSI. Moreover, such a definition allows us to show that in different regime contexts, party system stability does not necessarily depend on the level of institutionalization of the system's constitutive units.

Party institutionalization

When it comes to PI, the literature differentiates between internal-external and structural-attitudinal dimensions (e.g., Randall and Svåsand 2002). While the internal dimension refers to the intra-organizational characteristics of political parties, the external dimension entails parties' relationships with their voters, which consists of the presence of a stable core electorate and party-voter linkage based on the party itself instead of its momentary leadership. Following the initial definition of party institutionalization, which denominates a process by which organizations acquire value and stability

(Huntington 1968), we also differentiate between structural (stabilization) and attitudinal (value infusion) dimensions (Levitsky 1998; Randall and Svåsand 2002).

We follow a two-fold strategy to delineate parties' level of routinization: (a) a static approach that entails some basic indicators of organizational strength (see, Tavits 2013) and (b) a symptomatic approach that aims to understand the level of personalization and *ad-hoc* decision-making inside the party organization.³ To measure the level of organizational strength and degree of personalization, we use the V-Party dataset (Lührmann et al. 2020). We measure value infusion by examining the parties' candidate selection and recruitment processes and analyse party elites' statements regarding the party. The former analysis will offer a clue as to the adherence of elites to the party or party leader. If the candidate selection and recruitment are under the near or total control of the party leader, value infusion is low. To measure this indicator, we use the V-Party dataset Candidate Nomination data (Lührmann et al. 2020). Finally, yet importantly, for the party-voter linkage, we use a supply-side analysis to understand how the party mobilizes its core constituency. The supply-side of party-voter linkage stands out as an indirect measure of the party's external value infusion and will be measured by the level of personalization (the prominence of the party leader) in electoral mobilization by utilizing the V-Party dataset's Salience and Mobilization indices (Lührmann et al. 2020). Table 1 summarizes the dimensions and indicators that will be used to assess the level of PSI.

PSI and PI in Turkey

PSI

Turkey's experience with multi-party democracy goes way back. Nevertheless, such longevity failed to bring about a stable party system, not least due to the military's frequent interventions in politics (Sayarı 2002; Duman and Tsarouhas 2006). Following such interventions, the military closed mainstream political parties and reshuffled party competition. Despite such external interference and with reference to cleavage-based

Table 1. Dimensions and indicators of incumbent PI and PSI.

	Structural	Attitudinal
Party	<p>Internal Routinization <i>Indicators:</i> (a) Organizational complexity and strength (party bylaws, membership level, presence of formal and informal rules, and V-Party Dataset) (b) lack of <i>ad-hoc</i> decision-making and level of intra-party personalization (V-Party Dataset)</p>	<p>Value infusion <i>Indicators:</i> (a) candidate selection and recruitment patterns (V-Party Dataset). (b) Party elites' statements on party as an organization.</p>
	<p>External</p>	<p>Party-voter linkage <i>Indicators:</i> V-Party Dataset electoral mobilization data</p>
Party System	<p>Stability of inter-party competition <i>Indicators:</i> (a) Aggregate electoral volatility scores (Pedersen's electoral volatility index) (b) Effective number of electoral and legislative parties.</p>	<p>Legitimacy of political parties <i>Indicators:</i> Trust in political parties, number of voters that feel close to a political party (European Social Survey Data).</p>

Source: Authors' own compilation.

Table 2. Basic indicators of party system stability Turkey (1991–2018).

Turkey			
Election Year	EV*	ENPP**	ENEP***
1991	19.53	3.6	4.7
1995	21.05	4.4	6.2
1999	22.35	4.9	6.8
2002	54.09	1.8	5.4
2007	17.56	2.3	3.5
2011	12.15	2.3	3.0
2015 (June)	10.31	3.1	3.7
2015 (November)	8.57	2.5	3.0
2018	11.75	3.1	3.7

Source: Authors' own calculations.

*EV (Electoral Volatility): Electoral volatility scores were calculated using Pedersen's (1979) formula for aggregate electoral volatility.

$$EV = \frac{\sum |v_{i,t-1} - v_{i,t}|}{2},$$

v_i refers to vote share of party i th at the given election t and $v_{i,t-1}$ is the vote share of the same party in previous election.

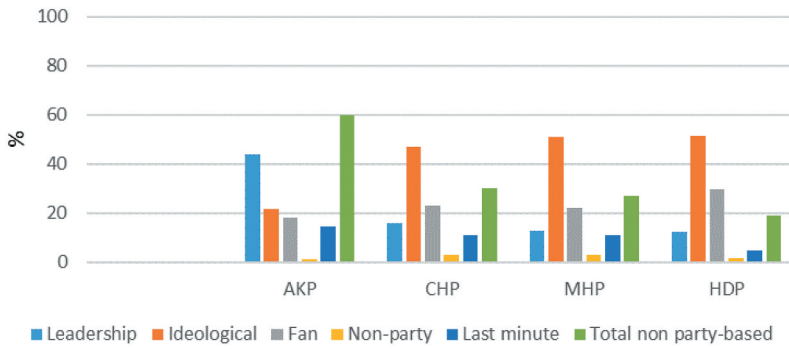
**ENPP (Effective Number of Legislative Parties) is based on Laakso and Taagepera's (1979) formula: $ENP = 1 / \sum_{i=1}^n s_i^2$, s_i is the proportion of i th party seat shares.

***ENEP (Effective Number of Electoral Parties) = $1 / \sum_{i=1}^n v_i^2$, v_i is the proportion of votes i th party. All the parties and independent candidates in the legislature are included in the calculations of ENPP and ENEP.

voting, the Turkish party system demonstrates a certain pattern of stability. Following the establishment of multi-party politics in 1946, it has ranged from a classic two-party system (1950–1960) to an extreme or polarized multi-party system (1961–1980), followed by a highly fragmented, polarized and volatile party system (1990–2002) (Özbudun 2013).

As Özbudun suggests, the three maladies of the Turkish party system have been fragmentation, high volatility, and polarization (Özbudun 2013). While some of these maladies continue, during the AKP's period of incumbency (2002 onwards), aggregate electoral volatility scores show significant stabilization compared to the 1990s (Table 2). Similarly, party system fragmentation is declining. From 2002 to 2018, the party system demonstrated significant stability; this period coincides with the AKP's rise (e.g., Gumuscu 2013) and the depiction of the Turkish party system as reliant on AKP dominance (Müftüler-Baç and Keyman 2012).

Turning to the attitudinal dimension of party system institutionalization in Turkey, while trust in political parties measured by European Social Survey (ESS) 2008 figures remains low, individual party identification remains over 60% for all the major parties in the system.⁴ More recently, the findings of survey-based research conducted by KONDA (2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d) reveal that except for the incumbent AKP, all relevant parties in the party system demonstrate a party-voter linkage mostly based on party-based linkage. The percentage of non-party voters is low, which is indicative of a certain level of legitimacy attributed to political parties (Graph 1).



Graph 1. Voter rationale and motivation (Turkey). Source: KONDA (2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d).

Note: the total non-party-based category is the aggregation of 'last minute,' 'non-party', and 'leadership' categories.

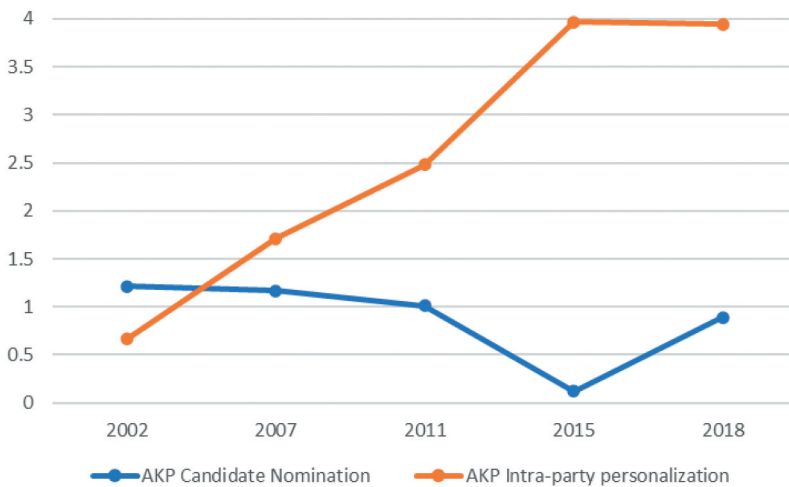
The preceding analysis of structural and attitudinal dimensions of the Turkish party system demonstrates that since 2002, the Turkish party system has displayed an increasing level of stabilization through structural and attitudinal institutionalization. More importantly, and contrary to findings in the literature on the necessity of systemic institutionalization for democratic consolidation, Turkey entered a process of autocratization in temporal coincidence with its party-systemic stabilization. Several factors ranging from the 'unevenness of the party system' (Randall and Svåsand 2002) due to increasing authoritarian manipulations to excessive polarization can be put forward in accounting for system-level stabilization alongside autocratization. Nevertheless, when the unit level institutionalization of the incumbent party is analysed, and again contrary to the initial conceptualization of party system institutionalization, institutionalization at the systemic level is not reflected at the unit level. To empirically demonstrate the discrepancy between unit- and systemic-level combination, the next section will assess unit (individual) party institutionalization for AKP.

Incumbent PI

When tested against the minimal conceptualizations of PI, the AKP passes the test of internal and external institutionalization.⁵ The party has a complex and hierarchical extra-parliamentary organization and territorially comprehensive local organization networks. The AKP has been supplying candidates and participating in elections with a nationwide presence for more than three consecutive election contests. Turning to the classical indicators of external party institutionalization, AKP's individual electoral volatility scores demonstrate strong stability as the party's vote share never dropped below 40% since the 2007 elections, with an average single party volatility score of 2.9. Compared to its main competitors, the AKP's number of party members and membership voter ratio also stand out as further indicators of AKP's external and internal stabilization. To illustrate, the AKP's number of party members in 2011 was close to 8 million, with a membership-to-voter ratio of 37% (Yardımcı-Geyikçi 2015). Nevertheless, a more detailed analysis of AKP on our proposed indicators of individual party institutionalization demonstrates that the AKP has been de-institutionalizing.

First, the AKP has an overly centralized party organization dominated by party leadership. Initially, the presence of collective leadership was the central feature of AKP's formation. The AKP was formed because of a split in parties that represented the National Outlook Movement, an ideological current in Turkish politics seeking to combine Islamism and nationalism. Initially, during the early 2000s, the party leader was constrained by other prominent party figures influential in the party (Kumbaracıbaşı 2009; Lancaster 2014).

It is true that contrary to the basic organizational features of Turkish parties, the AKP used to have several formal democratic intra-party features; consultation with other organizational units was initially the norm inside the party (Kumbaracıbaşı 2009). Nevertheless, and this is our second piece of evidence regarding the AKP's progressive de-institutionalization, the promise of intra-party democracy was short-lived. Amendments introduced through party bylaws in 2003 meant that the party organization became highly centralized at the leadership level (Kumbaracıbaşı 2009). The dynamics of AKP's personalization are covered extensively within the context of under-institutionalization of intra-party democratic procedures and de-institutionalization of AKP (Kumbaracıbaşı 2009; Lancaster 2014; Baykan 2018; Çınar 2019). Some studies conceptualize AKP as a 'personalized mass-party' due to the party's combination of organizational strength, involving a high level of party membership and territorial comprehensiveness with a high level of personalization (Baykan 2018). Especially starting from 2007, inside the AKP, the influence of the collective leadership decreased substantially, in turn reinforcing the personal power of party leader Erdoğan on party organization (Lancaster 2014; Yardımcı-Geyikci and Yavuziyılmaz 2020). V-Dem's V-Party Data shows the increasing level of personalization of AKP (Graph 2).

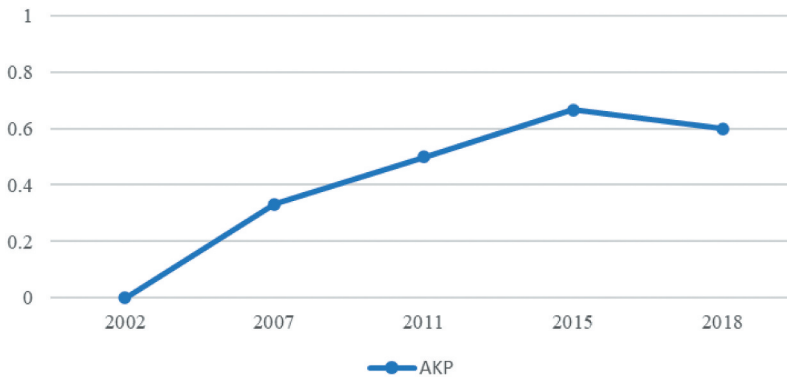


Graph 2. Level of intra-party personalization and candidate nomination (AKP). Source: V-Party Dataset V1 (Lührmann et al. 2020). X-axis denotes general elections in Turkey between 2002 and 2018. Y-axis denotes the level of personalization (Orange line) (4 highest level of personalization, 0 lowest level of personalization) and type of candidate nomination (Blue line) (4 all registered voters decide on candidate nomination, 0 the party leader unilaterally decides on candidate nomination).

Factional rivalries inside dominant parties may also initiate institutional decay or de-institutionalization and may have significant repercussions for democratization (Gillespie et al. 1995; Gunther and Diamond 2003; Boucek 2012). Some studies suggest that increasing personalization, as a symptom of AKP's de-institutionalization, is also a response against increasing factional rivalries inside the party. Within the context of autocratization, prospects of elite-level defections and rivalry increased the instances of ad-hoc decision-making and de-routinization inside the AKP organization (Yardımcı-Geyikci and Yavuziyilmaz 2020).

Such overt centralization of the party organization also feeds into decreasing levels of internal value infusion. The concentration of power to recruit party personnel and nominate candidates in the hands of the party leader increases the attachment of party elites and personnel to the leader instead of the party as a collective organization. The party thus loses its intrinsic value. AKP's candidate selection procedures have remained highly centralized under the direct control of party leadership (Graph 2).

Leader-centred intra-party procedures and an attitudinal attachment to the *persona* of the leader are also evident in AKP's linkages to its core constituency. In terms of party-voter linkages, AKP's electoral mobilization strategies have been increasingly resting on the charismatic personality of the party leader (Graph 3) and less on the party's programmatic position vis a vis its constituents.



Graph 3. Leadership-based electoral mobilization (AKP). Source: *V-Party Dataset V1* (Lührmann et al. 2020). X-axis denotes general elections in Turkey between 2002 and 2018. Y-axis denotes the level of leadership based electoral mobilization (0 lowest level, 1 highest level).

Defining the nature of the beast: under/over institutionalized or ossified party systems?

The preceding analysis shows that individual party institutionalization is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for party system institutionalization. Individual party institutionalization and systemic institutionalization are not the same things; in fact, they can be at odds with one another under autocratization. How can we then conceptualize this rather peculiar combination of incumbent party de-institutionalization in congruence with systemic stabilization?

One option is to follow Andreas Schedler and identify these party systems as over-institutionalized, in which stability goes hand in hand with a lack of belonging to political parties among the electorate (Schedler 1995). However, some of the attributes of over-institutionalized party systems do not fit the cases. Schedler (1995) suggests that in over-institutionalized systems, collective identities contaminate or colonize members' individual identities. Thus, political parties become everything and instead of individuals, parties dominate the political stage (Schedler 1995). Such a description is in contradiction with the case of Turkey. Here, the charismatic leader dominates the political stage, with the party playing a secondary role. Moreover, conceptualizing the Turkish case as under-institutionalized or possessing an inchoate party system is exaggerated, considering the level of stability the Turkish party system had attained throughout the 2000s.

Another way to conceptualize this peculiar combination of incumbent party de-institutionalization and systemic institutionalization is the concept of dominant and hegemonic party system (Pempel 1990; for the Turkish case, see, Gumuscu 2013; Çınar 2019). Nevertheless, this concept is based on the cycle of the dominance of incumbent parties but remains neutral regarding incumbent parties' level of institutionalization. It is, therefore, outside the scope of the present analysis.

To explain the peculiar coincidence of systemic institutionalization with incumbent-level party de-institutionalization, we adopt the concept of an 'ossified party system.' This entails a combination of high system-level stability and concomitant low levels of incorporation of societal interests and demands (Rodriguez and Rosenblatt 2018, 5). Like other conceptual depictions, some of the attributes and indicators of ossified party systems fit the case of Turkey. Nevertheless, Rodriguez and Rosenblatt's (2018) concept of ossified systems does not distinguish between individual party institutionalization and systemic stability. Instead, their focus is on the adaptive capacity of the party system to the changing societal demands and interests. In our case, based on its strong party organization, the AKP demonstrates a capacity to mobilize its electorate. In fact, the party stands out as a paradigmatic case of adaptation to the changing preferences of its electorate as well as changing the preferences of its constituency through its extensive organizational presence.

Autocratization and systemic ossification: the causal link

In the preceding sections, we demonstrate that the Turkish party system has been converting towards ossification. Although Turkey's autocratization correlates with party systemic ossification, many important dynamics are inherent to the autocratization process that cause systemic stability under incumbent party de-institutionalization. These dynamics are: (1) the increasing unevenness of party competition and (2) the changing form and intensification of polarization.

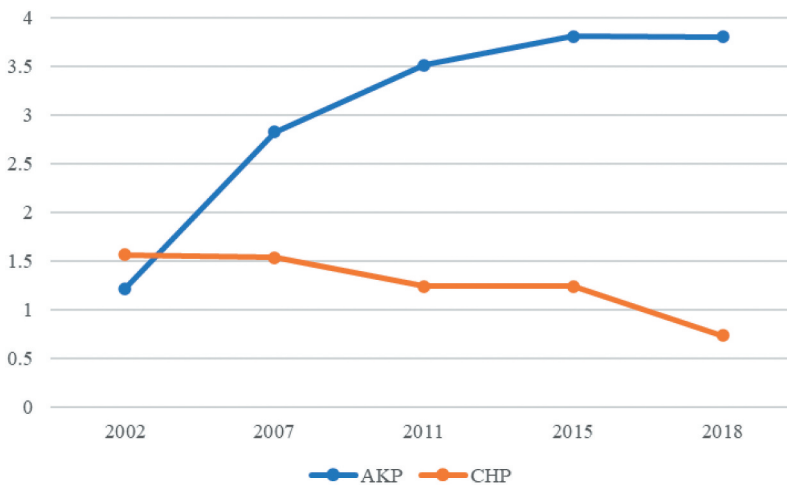
Increasing unevenness of party competition

Autocratization processes entail decreasing freedom and fairness of the electoral process. Such rising unevenness of party competition is the fundamental causal link between autocratization and party systemic ossification in Turkey (Esen and Gumuscu 2016). The fairness of the election process has deteriorated through new legislation. Amendments to

the country's Electoral Law unilaterally made by AKP and its coalition partner, the right-wing Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* - MHP) in 2018, further aggravated the opposition parties' coordination problems and benefited the incumbent. Increasing media control and state resources by the incumbent party is another factor that aggravated the unevenness of party competition (Esen and Gumuscu 2020). Several international Election Observation Mission reports of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) demonstrate the increasing levels of unevenness within the electoral domain, especially through the uneven media appearance of candidates benefitting AKP candidates and the increasingly partisan control of institutions responsible for the integrity of the electoral process.⁶

The unevenness of the electoral process further intensifies with the increasing prominence of clientelistic party-voter linkages, especially during the electoral mobilization cycle.⁷ Such prevalence of clientelistic electoral mobilization intensifies with processes of state capture and increasing control over erstwhile independent regulatory agencies (Öniş 2019; Esen and Gumuscu 2020). Regarding AKP's patron-client relationships, the party also heavily utilized its dominance of local governments and its organizational strength in terms of local party organizations (Ocaklı 2015; Çınar 2019). Such a local presence has helped the AKP to systematize patron-client relationships by selectively targeting social assistance and other non-programmatic distributive policies to its constituency (Çarkoğlu and Aytaç 2015; Ark-Yıldırım 2017; Kemahlioğlu and Bayer 2020). Moreover, AKP's local infrastructural investments at the local level have been extensively utilized as an instrument for the party's patronage and pork-barrel policies (Çınar 2016, 2019).

For the AKP, clientelistic electoral mobilization has become a prominent strategy. Recently published V-Party data (Graph 4) shows the rising level of clientelistic electoral mobilization and unevenness in this type of party-voter linkage between the AKP on the one hand, and the largest opposition party, the centre-left Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* - CHP), on the other.



Graph 4. Clientelistic voter mobilization (AKP and CHP). Source: V-Party Dataset V1 (Lührmann et al. 2020). X-axis denotes general elections in Turkey between 2002 and 2018. Y-axis denotes the level of clientelistic mobilization (0 lowest level, 4 highest level).

The increasing prominence of clientelism as an electoral mobilization strategy of the incumbent party leads to relatively lower volatility rates for AKP by captivating voters for as long as it is able to distribute benefits in return for votes.

Although clientelistic voter mobilization and patronage networks constitute the cornerstone of AKP's electoral dominance, other dynamics also contributed to the party's electoral dominance. Gümüşcü (2013) suggests that AKP's emergence as a predominant party rests on its capacity to achieve a 'virtuous cycle of dominance,' which involved economic success, including sustaining economic growth and achieving low inflation, successful distributive social policies, a combination of ideological rigidity and flexibility, and successful delegitimization of the opposition. Similarly, Çınar (2019) suggests that AKP's hegemony is based on its capacity to penetrate society through institutional, state-level, and societal factors and on its success in selective marginalization and subordination of the opposition. Nevertheless, among other factors, the party's failure to combine its non-programmatic distributive policies with successful economic performance stands out as the main problem in terms of sustaining its electoral dominance, especially since 2013 (e.g., Çınar 2019; Yavuzılmaz 2021 among others).

Increasing levels and changing form of polarization

Another important dynamic intrinsic to the process of autocratization is the increasing and changing form of polarization. Turkey suffers from what has been termed 'pernicious polarization,' with several cross-cutting cleavages aggregated into two blocks (Somer 2019). Although such polarization is political, as it is initiated by both incumbent and opposition parties, on the demand side, it is a factor that captivates voters inside the emerging duopolistic cleavage. This form of polarization leads to systemic stabilization, even though the level of individual party institutionalization declines.

Another important component of this polarization is the rising regime cleavage due to the intensification of the autocratization process. As autocratization proceeds, existing social and political cleavages gather around a regime-based cleavage between parties and voters that demand re-democratization and the ones that continue to support the incumbent parties (Selçuk and Hekimci 2020). Survey research conducted by KONDA shows that over 80% of the opposition party voters perceive the incumbent AKP as tyrannic. (KONDA 2018). The intensity of regime-based cleavage is another factor leading to systemic stabilization as it captivates voters in each camp.

As a result of this analysis, we suggest that the concept of party system ossification proposed by Rodriguez and Rosenblatt's (2018) be broadened to account for party systems whose stability is based on incumbent parties' under- or de-institutionalization. Such stability is fragile and carries a strong potential for destabilization or even implosion. This is not down to the incapacity of these parties to adapt to changing societal interests and demands. Instead, it results from over-centralization and de-routinization of their organizational structures under the iron fist of their leaders, which increases the possibility of defections in case of a performance failure and/or leadership change. Moreover, the prevalence of non-party based linkages increases the prospects of electoral de-stabilization in case of leadership change and/or performance failure. The case of AKP demonstrates the fragility of party-systemic stability under ossified party systems, which can potentially become highly destabilized.

Such de-stabilization is premised on the under-institutionalization of incumbent parties, both internally and externally. First, the AKP's organizational structures are subject to its charismatic leader. Due to the dominance of recruitment and candidate nomination processes by the party leader, party elite attachments are almost exclusively oriented towards the party leader instead of the party. Second, at the local party level, attachment to the party organization is superseded by selective rewards and benefits. Erdoğan has illustrated the phenomenon through recent remarks, pointing out that party personnel has become less voluntaristic and increasingly self-interested (CNNTurk 2017). Third, due to the absence of mechanisms to incorporate different interests through routinized intra-party mechanisms, the AKP is prone to defections and factional rivalry in case of performance failure and loss of perceptive invincibility.

While it is highly probable that leadership succession will exacerbate such defections and rivalries, even during the tenure of their charismatic leaders, in case of performance failure such as electoral defeat, rivalries may lead to party splits and defections. Turkey provides empirical evidence in that direction. When Erdoğan chose former Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu as his successor, the party's electoral fortunes declined. For the first time in over a decade, the party was forced to contemplate governing in a coalition or even being forced out of office. It was only after Erdoğan interfered personally by calling for a new election that the AKP recovered and managed another electoral victory (Onis 2016). Davutoğlu left the party soon afterwards as his authority waned, and internal party reform bypassed him completely (DW 2016). He eventually resigned from leadership and set up his own party. Davutoğlu claims that AKP local/provisional heads were ready to resign with him (T24 2020). Similarly, another prominent former AKP figure and former Finance Minister, Ali Babacan, followed suit and resigned from AKP. He has established a new party that, just as the AKP, appeals to the vast centre-right electorate. It is noteworthy that the number of former AKP politicians and personnel is high within the founding cadres of both parties (BBC News 2020).

Currently, three new parties are targeting centre-right voters within the Turkish party system.⁸ Such fragmentation increases the potential of what Mainwaring et al. (2016) call extra-system volatility, which denotes a process of voting shifts to new parties instead of the established ones. Should such volatility be confirmed in the ballot box, the fragmentation and high volatility that characterized the Turkish party system in the 1990s will have made a spectacular return (Özbudun 2013).

Patronage, pork-barrel policies, and clientelism constitute important aspects of electoral mobilization for the AKP. Such reliance on materialist party-voter linkages, instead of linkages based on ideology or party program, increases the susceptibility of the party to electoral loss in case of a disruption in the channels that sustain such linkages. Local election results in Turkey suggest that such a scenario is plausible.

The AKP and its junior ally MHP were defeated in major metropolitan areas in 2019, shattering the image of infallibility they had previously cultivated. Local administrations had been key in securing patronage, and electoral losses increase the prospect of a vote shift towards the opposition parties (Esen and Gumuscu 2019; Yavuzylmaz 2021). In Turkey, survey-based research findings suggest that the core voting base of AKP consists of lower socio-economic strata with high susceptibility to an economic downturn (KONDA 2018a).⁹ Despite efforts by the party leadership to mobilize its core electorate

during the 2019 local elections, an important segment of the party's electorate defected to opposition candidates (Yavuzylmaz 2021).¹⁰

Overall, the concept of systemic ossification denotes a process by which systemic stabilization and incumbent party de-institutionalization go hand in hand, which goes against the conventional understanding of the relationship between individual party institutionalization and systemic stability. Such a process is causally linked with the inherent dynamics of autocratization, which are a) the increasing unevenness of party competition, b) rising polarization, and c) the emergence of a regime-based cleavage between the proponents of re-democratization and those that aim at sustaining autocratic politics. Further, our use of systemic ossification also signifies the fragility of contemporary forms of autocratization and the potential of systemic instability caused by low levels of incumbent party institutionalization. Although potential systemic instability does not equate to re-democratization, it is a critical party-based dynamic of contemporary forms of autocratization.

Conclusion

Autocratization has become a highly topical subject, not least due to the evident decay in new democracies and the erosion of liberal democratic institutions in consolidated democracies (Lürhmann and Lindberg 2019). To better understand these phenomena, we need to revisit our conceptual toolboxes, which is necessary not only to seek to account for autocratization but also to understand the exact conditions of democratization and democratic consolidation. Political parties, the core organizational units and major actors that aggregate collective interests and structure competition, play a key role in that process. The prevalence of political parties in contemporary forms of autocratization also forces us to revisit existing concepts and typologies to understand the dynamics of party politics in cases of reverse regime change. After all, parties and party systems remain important and often facilitate autocratic politics. Understanding how they work and why they operate the way they do is, therefore, essential.

In this article, we scrutinized the relationship between systemic stabilization and individual party institutionalization, for which the existing literature has often drawn opposite conclusions. We have done so using Turkey as a case. Our conceptualizations of PI and PSI allow us to decouple the two concepts. Our empirical data, drawn from survey-based research, election results, and symptomatic analysis, show that systemic stabilization can go hand in hand with party de-institutionalization at the individual party level. Further, our findings show that under conditions of autocratization, party institutionalization is neither necessary nor sufficient for stabilization at the system level. Although some concepts capture bits and pieces of these dynamics, we demonstrated that they fail to grasp the peculiar dynamics we empirically demonstrate. To conceptually portray forms of systemic and individual party-level dynamics, we used and subsequently modified the concept of the ossified party system, which signifies the fragility of system-level stability in Turkey. The concept of ossified party systems captures an important combination prevalent in contemporary forms of autocratization. Similar dynamics to those demonstrated here can be found in other cases of autocratization, such as in Serbia (Bieber 2020) and Hungary.

Such a conceptualization allows us to depict systemic and individual-level institutionalization dynamics in competitive authoritarian regimes. The case of Turkey demonstrates that one causal explanation for the ‘surprising instability of competitive authoritarian regimes’ (Carothers 2018) may rest in their peculiar combination of incumbent-level party de-institutionalization and systemic stability. Such an arrangement is inherently fragile and premised on the need for political stability to reproduce itself. A sudden change in party leadership and/or declining electoral popularity due to decreasing performance legitimacy can thus prove highly destabilizing. The specific interaction between PI and PSI under autocratization, which we conceptualized as systematic party ossification, requires further testing and confirmation through more research on different country cases of autocratization. Further research is also needed to better delineate the prospects of democratization in cases where party systems become ossified under autocratization.

Notes

1. There is by now a wide typology in the relevant literature regarding the erosion of democratic political systems. Following Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) we adopt the term ‘autocratization’ as an overarching concept that denotes ‘any move from full democracy’ to denote developments in Turkey. This better captures the process of regime change in Turkey from a defective democracy to a competitive authoritarian regime (Esen and Gumuscu 2016; Levitsky and Way 2020).
2. Where appropriate and to enhance the explanatory power of our case study, we compare Turkey with Hungary. The latter is also often regarded as a typical form of contemporary autocratization and categorized under competitive authoritarian regime type (Levitsky and Way 2020). Further, comparing the evolution of the AKP in Turkey and in line with our variables with that of the governing Fidesz in Hungary facilitates a better understanding of systemic ossification under autocratization.
3. For routinization see Levitsky (1998) and Harmel et al. (2018).
4. ESS (2008) round survey results indicate that 64% of the respondents have low trust for political parties while moderate trust is 24.1% and high trust is 11.6% (ESS 2008; Yardımcı-Geyikçi 2015, 534).
5. The minimal conceptualizations of PI, instead of increasing the intensity of the concept, focus more on its extensity. To this end, some scholars propose some benchmarks for a party to be considered institutionalized. These include party age, the territorial presence and effective candidate supply of the party as well as the record of competition over at least three electoral cycles (For a review of these approaches see, Harmel et al. 2018).
6. <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-41632586>, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-41632586>.
7. For a general review of the research on clientelism and patronage in Turkey see, Sayarı (2014).
8. The third party is *İyi Parti* (the Good Party) which is a new party established in 2017. It split from the ultra-nationalist MHP and its origins lie in dissatisfaction with the direction that the MHP has taken in recent years, not least the party’s alliance with the AKP.
9. Several studies also show that economy is one of the most prominent issues that determine the preferences of AKP voters throughout its incumbency along with conservatism and security concerns see, Çarkoğlu 2008, 2012; Aytaç and Çarkoğlu (2019); Kalaycıoğlu (2017) among others.
10. Recent efforts by the AKP leadership to block some of the policies of opposition-led municipalities are also indicative of the importance of local governments for its clientelistic party-voter linkages.

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