

# Transformational Party Leaders: Determinants of Leadership Style Assessment in Central and Eastern Europe

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## Abstract

The literature discussing leadership style identifies great variation between contemporary party leaders. While much attention is devoted to their actions, portrayal in the media, and relationships with their followers, there is limited analysis of which factors make a party leader transformational or transactional. This article addresses this gap in the literature and seeks to identify the characteristics of the party leaders or of the party to which they belong which lead party members to evaluate them on the transactional–transformational continuum. It uses original survey data from a modified version of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire. The analysis includes 12 political parties with parliamentary representation from Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania between 2004 and 2018. The findings illustrate that members perceive as more transformational the first leaders of the party, those who have won competitive internal elections, and those with extensive political experience within the party.

## Keywords

leadership style; organization; party leaders; post-communism; transformational

## 1. Introduction

Party leaders continue to be important for their parties, in terms of winning elections and for governance in general (Bittner, 2011; Ceron, 2012; Lobo, 2018). In an era of highly personalized politics (Pedersen & Rahat, 2021), much depends upon the individual political actors and their characteristics rather than on institutions or collective actors. This importance is reflected, for example, in voters’ orientation toward party leaders in many countries that use an electoral system based on proportional representation, in which political parties often

have prominence over candidates compared to majoritarian systems. To take another example, party leaders are also prominent in parties that use a more strataarchical form of organization in which the decision-making is distributed among the various levels and units within the party (Cross, 2018). Even in these circumstances the leaders serve as the image of the party and are recognizable by both members and voters. This also largely applies to parties springing from social movements.

Since party leaders have high influence over the internal and external lives of their parties, leadership styles are important because they reflect their abilities and approaches, and allow a better understanding of their actions (Gherghina, 2020; Harmel & Svåsand, 1993). Party leadership styles can be assessed either objectively—through a review of leaders' statements or behaviors—or subjectively, by examining the ways in which leaders see themselves, or how members, activists, and voters see them. Understanding the perceptions of members about their leaders is important because members are at the core of parties' functioning, so their views give insights into leaders' legitimacy and members' reasons to engage in the internal life of their party (Astudillo & Detterbeck, 2020; Scarrow, 2015; van Haute & Gauja, 2015). This is of particular relevance when referring to the transformational vs. transactional style of leaders. Previous research has looked at members' perceptions of their leader's charisma (McDonnell, 2016), or explained party members' perceptions of leadership styles on the transactional–transformational continuum by focusing on members' characteristics (Gherghina, 2021).

However, we do not yet know if leader or party characteristics influence members' assessment of leadership styles. This article fills that gap in the literature and aims to explain the extent to which four characteristics of leaders and two of political parties influence members in considering the leaders of their parties as being more transformational. The study covers 12 political parties with continuous parliamentary representation in Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania. It disregards the new parties formed in this period which have had fewer than two parliamentary terms in office. The dependent variable of this study is the party members' assessment of party leaders on the transactional–transformational continuum (Avolio & Bass, 1995; Burns, 1978) with the help of the results of a survey based on a modified version of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire. The survey was conducted in May–July 2018 with a minimum of 50 party members from each of the 12 parties, distributed as follows: 35 ordinary members, 10 leaders of local branches, and five national-level officials and parliamentarians. The members had great variation in terms of age, length of party membership, and area of residence. The survey used respondents from across these levels to ensure broad coverage within each party. The party members were asked to assess the style of all the leaders of their party in office between 2004 and 2018, including instances in which the same party leader had had several terms in office. In total, the survey covered 28 party leaders with 47 terms in office; the latter is the unit of analysis in this article. The members' assessment was aggregated into a single score per party leader for one term in office and to level out party members' characteristics. The independent variables come from secondary sources such as election databases, party websites, and leaders' CVs or short biographies.

This analysis helps in advancing the broader study of leadership in two directions. First, it informs about the organizational implications of the leader effect and personalization. In line with existing studies, the article seeks to understand political leadership from the followers' perspective (Metz, 2024) in the specific setting of several contemporary political parties. In doing so, it complements leader-centric studies reliant on the analysis of styles and traits that are rarely comparable across leaders and political settings. Second, the analysis draws on leadership studies that point to the internal dynamics of parties as organizations rather

than approaching party organizations from a structurally static perspective. Contemporary personalized or movement parties have reshaped the dominant leadership structure and expectations, bringing transformational leadership styles to the fore, while transactional leadership is more suited to the organizational structure and policies of earlier mass, catch-all, or even cartel parties. This development can be linked directly to the contemporary challenges faced by political parties which include a rapidly changing media environment, people's disconnection from society, legitimacy question marks, or, in some cases, lower party membership numbers.

The next section reviews the literature about transformational and transactional leadership and formulates several testable hypotheses about the potential leader and party causes for variation in members' assessment of leadership styles. The third section presents the data and methodology used in the article. The fourth section includes the results of the analysis and sets out their interpretation. The conclusions summarize the key findings and discuss the major implications for the broader fields of leadership studies and party politics.

## 2. Theory and Hypotheses

The leadership literature has dedicated significant attention to outlining the features of transactional and transformational styles. Burns (1978, 2003) set out the foundations of the theory by identifying some general differences between the two styles. In his view, the two styles are at the opposite ends of a single continuum that characterizes the relationship of leaders with their followers. At one end, transactional leadership focuses on short-term goals to be achieved through an exchange of resources. These leaders provide their followers with something they want, and require something else in return. At the other end of the spectrum, transformational leadership is more visionary, moves beyond short-term goals, and presupposes a leader-follower relationship based on an understanding of needs. These leaders proactively engage their supporters, attempting to create a shared vision and sense of purpose within the organization.

Transactional leadership is reactive, rests on the principles of reward and punishment, makes a direct appeal to the self-interest of individuals, and is characterized by an asymmetric relation in which leaders communicate their expectations or requirements to followers (Bass, 1997; Foley, 2013; Gherghina, 2021). Transactional leadership involves rewarding the followers deemed to meet these expectations (Judge & Piccolo, 2004), or punishing them when this does not happen. Management by exception is another characteristic, which means that leaders take corrective action when the interaction with their followers raises problems (Howell & Avolio, 1993).

Transformational leaders increase awareness of what is right, good, or important, motivate followers to achieve, intellectually stimulate those around them, foster high moral maturity, and inspire followers to go beyond their self-interests and aim for a greater good (Avolio et al., 1991; Bass, 1997). Transformational leadership provides idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration. These aims mean that leaders act in an exemplary way, motivate and inspire their followers, support and are sensitive to followers' input, question assumptions, and promote non-traditional thinking (Avolio & Yammarino, 2013; Bass & Avolio, 1997, 2000; Boehm et al., 2015; Tracey & Hinkin, 1998). Such leaders also pursue their followers' self-development, which can be achieved with the help of feedback to improve performance (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Tracey & Hinkin, 1998).

Over time, scholars have agreed that transactional and transformative leadership styles are a matter of scale rather than a dichotomy, and that leaders can be both transactional and transformational rather than adhering only to one type of characteristics (Avolio & Bass, 1995; Bass, 1985, 1999; Lowe et al., 1996). They can start with transactional features and take transformational actions, or the other way around.

These leader–follower relations have been translated to the realm of party politics by several studies. For example, Kitschelt (2000) illustrates the transactional vs. transformational characteristics of leaders by referring to their clientelistic offers or the programmatic linkages that are driven by a logic of exchange with asymmetric transactions vs. charisma that inspires and leads followers to believe that their leaders can create a better future. The personal leaders in patrimonial or business-firm parties such as Silvio Berlusconi for Forza Italia or Andrej Babiš for ANO in the Czech Republic are illustrative examples of politicians with transactional characteristics (Cirhan & Kopecký, 2020; Musella, 2018). The leaders with charisma and personal attributes that lead to the development of their parties and inspire followers, such as Viktor Orbán for Fidesz and Gábor Vona for Jobbik, both in Hungary, and Umberto Bossi for Lega Nord in Italy, resemble transformational leaders (McDonnell, 2016; Metz & Oross, 2020).

This article tests the extent to which the characteristics of leaders and of political parties can shape members' assessment of leadership styles. The leader-level variables are the following: being the first leader of the party, the competitiveness of intra-party leadership selection, the level of experience in the party, and holding a high public office. The party-level variables are government incumbency and electoral loss. To start with the leaders' characteristics, the first argument relates to the first office holder of this position. Newly-formed political parties are appealing to the electorate due to their perceived distance from the traditional approaches of established parties, new issues, emphasis on specific ideological elements, strategies of mobilization, or freshness in their manner of doing politics, rather than the policy content (Lucardie, 2000; Sikk, 2012). The people who join these parties as members are motivated by the party values and policies, but also by the leader (Poletti et al., 2019). The first leaders of political parties are usually (one of) their founders, and members may view them in a positive light. Such leaders can be considered inspiring and motivational due to the ideas they support, their decision to embark on a difficult and uncertain venture, and their wish to break away from the existing ways of doing politics. These leaders often have the task of building party organizations to enhance sustainability in the electoral arena (Cirhan, 2023), which means that as leaders they serve as examples for the members on how to go beyond self-interest and aim for a greater good. Members' mobilization and recruitment can often happen through intellectually stimulating discourses and actions to raise awareness. All these factors indicate that founder-leaders may be perceived as more transformational than other party leaders.

The second argument is that the competitiveness of party leadership selection can influence perceptions of leadership style. In most political parties with minimal commitment to intra-party democracy, leaders are selected at the party congress, at a meeting of their territorial representatives, or through the involvement of party members in primaries (Cross & Pilet, 2016). The competitiveness of the leadership selection process comes through the number and strength of competitors. Competitive contests often lead to rich exchanges of ideas between the candidates, and expose party members to alternative avenues for action in the short and medium term. The candidates must persuade a majority of voters of their abilities and capacity to lead the party. In this context, transactional strategies based on rewards or appealing to members' self-interest are very unlikely to be successful electoral strategies. Instead, competitive elections can be won by candidates

who can act as role models that members can identify with, articulate a vision, promote high performance expectations for the party, and emphasize the importance of party goals. All these behaviors are traditionally associated with transformational leadership (Podsakoff et al., 1990). The uncontested selection of leaders, also known as “coronations,” can lead to more unpredictable leadership styles because of the lack of pressure on the candidates.

Leaders with extensive political experience are more competent in handling problems, mainly because they can acquire skills and develop abilities in the range of contexts associated with the positions they have occupied (Baturu & Elkind, 2022). The political experience of party leaders allows them to accumulate skills, networks (gaining human, social, and cultural capital), and reputation that enable them to raise and maintain the support needed to lead their party and continue in office (Claessen, 2023). Party leaders with party experience in various decision-making positions are familiar with how the organization works, what its members desire, what motivates them, and how things can be handled effectively. Leaders who have previously occupied positions in the party’s central office—the unit that is usually in charge of the day-to-day coordination of activities and decision-making in the party—know the ropes and understand the collective identity of the party. Such leaders are well placed to identify new opportunities, to intellectually stimulate the members, and to inspire them into a stronger mobilization that is less motivated by self-interest. Equally importantly, these are positions in which their qualities are visible to larger audiences (Gherghina, 2020; McDonnell, 2016).

Holding a national public office at the same time as the party leader position could influence perceptions of leadership style (Bankov, 2020). The leader is the face of the party when occupying a public office, which can provide several benefits if the person is popular among voters, but can also make unpopular public office holders more vulnerable (Uchiyama, 2023). For example, a prime minister can make appointments that motivate and show individual consideration for some party members; they can develop networks and connections that transcend partisan lines and thus broaden the horizon of their party; and they can use their political capital to inspire and ensure the development of their party. All these mean that party leaders in public office may be proactive in leadership style. Party leaders without a high public office such as prime minister or speaker of parliament usually have fewer resources, may lack a firm understanding of the political system beyond their party, and might adopt a reactive approach. Following all these arguments, I expect that members will perceive as more transformational:

- H1: The first leaders of the party.
- H2: Leaders selected through competitive selection processes.
- H3: Leaders with extensive experience in party positions.
- H4: Leaders who hold a high-level public office at the same time.

Moving on to the party-level variables, incumbency is one potential driver for members’ perceptions of leadership styles. Governing parties prioritize policy-making (Mair, 2008) and are constrained by the need to respond to salient problems in society (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010). Internal conflicts hinder parties’ performance in office, cast doubts over their competence, and compel parties to use supplementary resources. As such, the leaders of governing parties might pursue unity to avoid these costs, and a

transformational leadership style could achieve this task. Evidence from firm behavior indicates that transformational leadership can ensure team coordination and performance by encouraging members to adopt a cooperative approach (Zhang et al., 2011). Similarly, party leaders may adopt—or be perceived to adopt—this leadership style to manage conflicts efficiently within the party.

Electoral defeat is one important driver for party change in terms of organization and/or ideology (Harmel & Janda, 1994; Margalit et al., 2021). Party leaders often pay the price after electoral defeat: They may decide to resign as a sign that they are taking the blame for the poor performance. The new leaders then have the difficult task of resurrecting the party, rethinking some of its key policies, lifting members' spirits, and putting the party on the road to better results in the next election. A transformational leadership style is most appropriate to achieve these goals because it focuses on the group's needs and can ensure broader members' mobilization for swift recovery. In addition, an electoral loss can push members to see the post-defeat leaders through wishful-thinking lenses. The members may form beliefs about these leaders based on the need for transformation rather than on evidence or real behavior. Consequently, I expect that members will perceive the leaders of their party as more transformational when:

H5: The party is in government.

H6: The leader was elected after a loss in the national legislative elections.

### 3. Data and Method

To test these hypotheses, this article combines primary and secondary data. The primary data is used for the dependent variable, which is the positioning of party leaders on the transactional–transformational range. The data comes from a survey conducted in May–July 2018 among members of 12 political parties in Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania. The questionnaire included 21 multiple-choice questions that were asked from the members' point of view. In the original Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire, leaders were asked to evaluate their own style. This article uses a third-party assessment approach in which the classic self-perception Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire is replaced by the opinion of party members from several levels of the party. From each political party, a minimum of 50 members (and a maximum of 70) were targeted. While this number may seem small, surveying party members in these countries is challenging because many members are suspicious, and some parties want the approval of the leader to proceed. The answers were recorded either through an online link to the survey or by the research assistants, who met the members face-to-face or spoke with them over the phone. When comparing the answers recorded with these methods there was no observable bias in terms of completion rate or skipping questions.

These three countries were selected due to their similarities in terms of post-communist political systems, multi-party systems, frequent alternation of parties in government, and great variation between the parties in terms of leadership change. Moreover, the limited social embeddedness of political parties and their historical tradition of prominent leaders provide more space for charismatic leadership, which is often transformational (Hlousek, 2015). The analysis includes the parties that were regularly present in their country's parliament between 2004 or the year of their formation and 2018. All the survey respondents had been party members since 2004. The starting point of this study coincides with important progress made by Bulgaria and Romania in terms of their democratic performance. Both countries improved their international

ranking score around that year (Polity IV or Freedom House). Also, 2004 marked the first election cycle after the formal start of the accession negotiation for the EU accession in all three countries. The study includes the following parties: Ataka, Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), and Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) in Bulgaria; Fidesz, Jobbik, Politics Can Be Different (LMP), and Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) in Hungary; Liberal Democratic Party (PDL), National Liberal Party (PNL), Social Democratic Party (PSD), and Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR) in Romania. These parties had a total of 28 different leaders between 2004 and 2018. Some of those leaders had several terms in office, and the questionnaire asked the members to assess the leadership style of each of them. Interim or very short terms in office of the same party leader were removed from the analysis. Also, the survey pre-test indicated that party members did not distinguish between the different terms in office of some leaders, so these were collated. For example, Antonescu was elected as party leader in 2009, then re-elected in 2010 and 2013, but the members gave the same assessment for all three terms. As such, his terms were merged into one. When a party had had several leaders, several observations were recorded. For example, LMP had a dual leadership, so the party members were asked to assess the leadership style of each leader.

The unit of analysis is the assessment of a party leader per term in office. The units of observation are nested in parties. The assessment is the average of the members' assessment in the party, which is coded as an interval variable with values from 1 (*purely transactional*) to 5 (*purely transformational*). Each respondent answered 21 questions about leaders, with answers on a 5-point ordinal scale ranging from *not at all* (coded 1) to *always* (coded 5). For example, one item reads as follows: "Helps the members to develop." For each item there is a score between 1 and 5, with *purely transactional* and *purely transformational* as the extremes. The dependent variable is the average of these scores.

The first leader of the party (H1) is a dichotomous variable coded 1 for instances in which the leader is assessed by the members as having that characteristic. Competitiveness of leadership selection (H2) is measured on an interval-ratio scale using the indicator of competitiveness (Kenig, 2009). Uncontested elections are coded 0. The experience of the leader in party positions prior to becoming a leader (H3) is a count variable reflecting the number of years in any party position. Holding a public office (H4) is a dummy coded 1 if the party leader occupies the office of prime minister or speaker of parliament, and 0 otherwise. Party incumbency (H5) is a variable coded between 0 if the party had always been in opposition in the national parliament during the leader's term in office and 1 if the party had been in government. Since party leaders' terms do not necessarily coincide with election terms, the share of presence in government is calculated. For example, if a leader's term in office was three years, during which time the party was half in opposition and half in government, then the coding is 0.5. Electoral loss (H6) is measured on an interval ratio scale as the difference in votes between the elections, relative to the average electoral result (Gherghina, 2014). All the variables were standardized by subtracting the mean and dividing them by the standard deviation for each value.

The study uses bivariate and multi-level regression models to test the effects of leader-level and party-level variables. There is evidence of clustering. The chi-square test for the likelihood ratio test vs. logistic model is statistically significant, which gives support to the use of a multi-level as opposed to a single-level model. The model containing randomly varying intercepts fits significantly better than a single level where the intercepts are not randomly varying. However, the value of the estimated intraclass correlation coefficient is at the lower limit of the conventional threshold that indicates substantial clustering (0.05). The checks for

multicollinearity show no reason for concern. The highest value of the correlation coefficient between the independent variables is 0.46, between holding an office (leader-level variable) and incumbency (party-level variable). In some countries (e.g., Germany and the United Kingdom) the leader of the party forming the government automatically becomes the country's prime minister. However, this is not the case in any of the countries investigated here, which is one reason why the correlation between the two variables examined here is moderate. Another reason is that some parties included in the analysis were minor government coalition partners, while the prime minister belonged to another party.

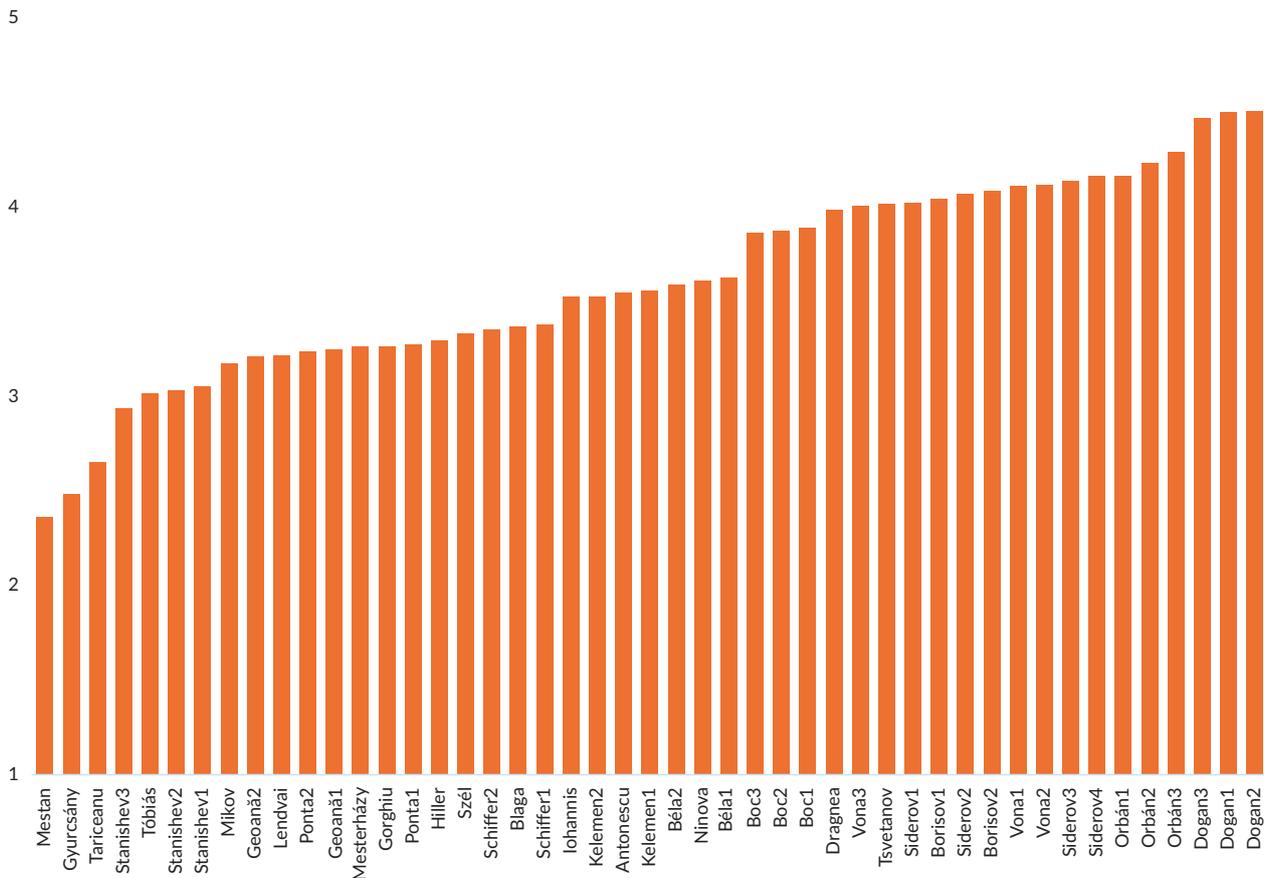
### 3.1. Robustness Checks

The statistical analysis could not include many variables because the number of cases is very low ( $N = 47$ ). The potential effect of several other variables that could have had an impact on members' assessment were tested, such as the party leader's age (count variable), party leader's gender (0 for female and 1 for male), whether the leaders were involved in scandals during their terms in office (0 for no scandals and 1 for various types of scandals), whether the leader came after a complete or partial term in office of their predecessors (0 for incomplete and 1 for complete), party size (count variable as a share of seats), and party age (count variable). The effects of these variables are presented in the Supplementary File, and the results indicate that none of them are either strong or statistically significant.

## 4. First Leaders, Competitive Elections, and Party Experience

There is great variation in the assessments of party leadership styles across the 47 terms in office. Figure 1 presents a comparison of the scores for the units of observation, listed on the horizontal axis. The vertical axis shows the scores on the transactional–transformational continuum, ranging between a minimum of 2.36 and a maximum of 4.50 with a mean of 3.60. Most party leaders are far from the transactional end of the spectrum: The lowest value is for Lyutvi Mestan from DPS in Bulgaria, an unsurprising assessment since Mestan abruptly ended his term in office as leader after being removed by the central office and expelled from the party due to his visible pro-Turkish-government stance after a controversy with Russia. At the same time, no leader is too close to the pure transformational end of the range either: Here, the highest value is for the second term covered in this analysis of Ahmet Dogan from DPS in Bulgaria. Dogan's three terms as leader covered by this study are ranked the highest, which may explain the DPS members' perceptions of Mestan as a transactional leader. In addition to his behavior in office, there could also have been a strong contrast with Dogan who was considered highly transformational. The second most transformational party leader is Orbán: All his terms in office covered by this study are ranked as highly transformational. He was assessed as increasingly transformational from one term to another, which could explain why he remains the uncontested leader of the party at the time of writing, six years after the survey was conducted. The distribution of leadership styles across parties shows no country bias.

The relatively high values in Figure 1 could be also due to the theoretical bias of the models that makes transformational leadership both socially and politically desirable, while transactional leadership is less attractive to members. Nye (2008) criticized Burns' conceptualization of transformational leadership because it has values attached to the concept instead of being free from normative judgments. Khanin (2007) argues that the approaches used by Bass also formulate normative expectations. These biases can be reflected in party members' individual expectations towards the leader of their party. There may be a strong



**Figure 1.** The assessment of party leadership styles in Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania.

projection of positive attributes when it comes to a representative member of the community (Haslam et al., 2020), such as a party leader.

Party members differentiated between the terms in office and assessed leaders with various degrees of transformational leadership. Some of the leaders were assessed as more transactional over time. For example, Sergey Stanishev had three terms in office as leader of BSP in Bulgaria in the period covered by this study, and the members rated his first term as the most transformational and his last term as the least transformational. He was at the lower end of the continuum, i.e., on the left-side bars in Figure 1. Emil Boc for PDL in Romania and Gabor Vona for Jobbik in Hungary had similar trajectories, both starting at much higher levels of transformational leadership. Like Orbán, other leaders were assessed as becoming more transformational over time; for example, Boyko Borisov for GERB in Bulgaria and Volen Siderov for Ataka in the same country. In most instances, party members assessed the leadership style of the same party leader in the same way, with some notable exceptions such as those of Stanishev or Vona.

Table 1 presents the correlation coefficients between the assessments of party leaders and each of the variables included in the hypotheses and the variables for robustness checks. The results of the correlations indicate strong support for H1, with the first leaders of the party being considered more transformational than other party leaders. The competitiveness of elections (H2) appears to make a difference, but in the opposite direction than was theoretically expected: Leaders who had had coronations were more transformational than those

**Table 1.** Bivariate correlations with assessment of party leadership styles.

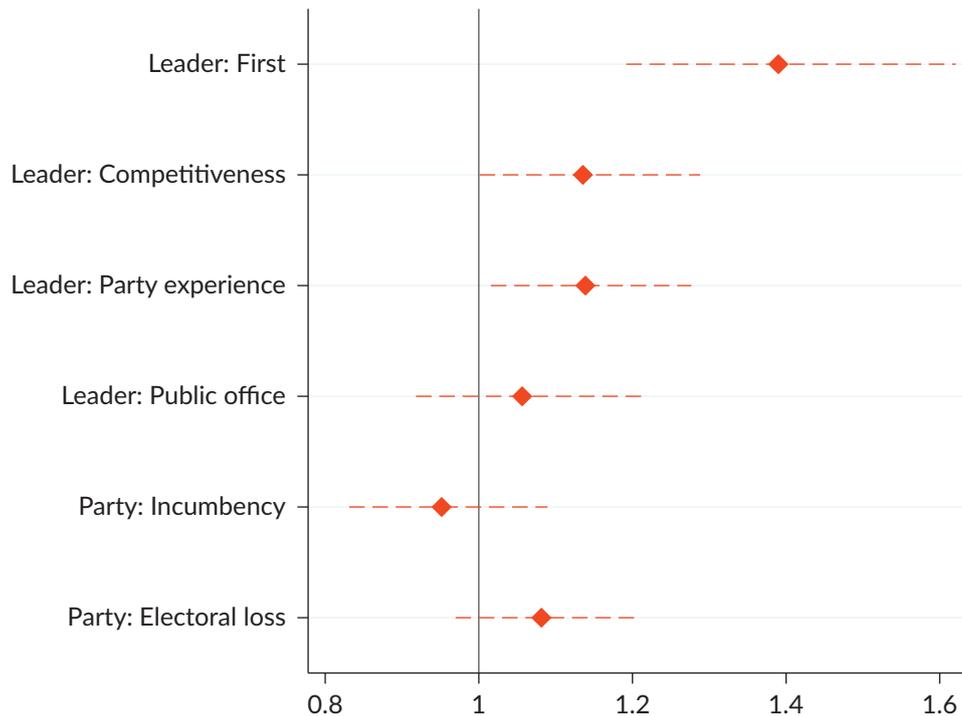
Level	Variable	Correlation coefficient
Leader	First leader	0.54**
	Competitiveness	-0.18
	Party experience	0.10
	Public office	-0.09
Party	Incumbency	-0.11
	Electoral loss	0.23
<b>Robustness</b>		
Leader	Scandals	-0.24
	Age	0.08
	Gender	0.15
Party	Incomplete term	0.13
	Size	-0.11
	Party age	-0.52**

Notes: \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ .

who had faced strong competition. The correlation with electoral loss (H6) is also counterintuitive, as the party leaders elected after an electoral gain were assessed as more transformational.

Among the variables included in the robustness checks, the leaders facing fewer scandals and those from newer parties were assessed as more transformational. Both of these results are intuitive, because involvement in a scandal can hardly be associated with the idealized influence, inspirational motivation, or intellectual stimulation that characterize transformational leadership. Party age is highly correlated (0.66) with being the first leader and competitive elections, and was not included in the statistical analysis due to reasons of collinearity. As such, the leaders of the newer parties were considered more transformational for the reasons outlined in the causal mechanism presented for H1.

The statistical analysis is presented in Figure 2 and must be taken with a grain of salt due to the low number of cases. The regression coefficients lend support to the first three hypotheses, according to which the leaders who were the first to run their party, those who reached office after more competitive elections, and those with high party experience prior to becoming leaders were considered more transformational by the party members. The strong positive effect of the first leaders was visible in Figure 1, where many of the leaders with high transformational scores were founder-leaders of their parties: Siderov for Ataka, Dogan for DPS, and Tsvetanov for GERB in Bulgaria; and Orbán for Fidesz and Jobbik in Hungary. Borisov, who also scored highly, was one of the GERB founder-elites but could not run the party until 2009 because he was the mayor of Sofia. In terms of competitiveness, Boc for PDL in Romania was assessed as more transformational after facing strong competition in the 2011 internal elections against Vasile Blaga, who became the party leader in 2012 after Boc resigned, following the party's poor results in the 2012 national legislative elections. The effect of party experience is unsurprising if we look at the profiles of the two top leaders according to the members' assessment (Dogan and Orbán), both of whom had many years of activity in the party before the terms in office covered by this study. At the other end of the spectrum, closer to a transactional profile, leaders such as Mestan for DPS in Bulgaria, Mesterházy for MSZP in Hungary, and Geoana for PSD and Gorghiu for PNL in Romania, all had limited party experience before becoming leaders.



**Figure 2.** The effects on leadership style assessment.

The presence of party leaders in public office does not influence members' assessment of their leadership styles. One possible explanation for this is that once in public office, some leaders devoted less time to party development and communication with members, focusing more on their cabinet work. The party can come second, especially when the prime minister must fight to govern with a parliamentary minority or cohabit with the president (Raunio & Sedelius, 2020; Samuels & Shugart, 2010). For example, Calin Popescu-Tariceanu was the PNL leader between 2004 and 2009 and prime minister between 2004 and 2008. He was forced to navigate the deep waters of a minority government after the coalition partners left (PDL, at the time called Democratic Party, PD). Tariceanu also conflicted with the country's president, a former PD president, with whom he had to cohabit until the elections in 2008. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that PNL's members considered him to be more transactional in his party activity.

The leadership styles are similar for parties in government and for those in opposition. One possible explanation could be that the leaders of opposition parties engage in a more transformational style in an attempt to reshape the organization and inspire their followers to create a long-lasting collective identity. Finally, party leaders who take office after an electoral loss of votes or defeat are not considered more transformational. This result may confirm previous findings that electoral defeat is acceptable provided the party remains in office (Bille, 1997). Party leaders may not be perceived as transformational after poor performance at the polls if the general state of the art does not change much. The corollary is that party leaders will not be assessed as more transactional even if they get better results in elections. For example, Mikhail Mikov became party leader of BSP in Bulgaria in July 2014, just a few months before a dramatic loss for the party, compared to the national legislative elections in 2013. As Figure 1 indicates, he was considered one of the most transactional leaders among those studied here. Kornelia Ninova won the internal elections against Mikov in May 2016, roughly 10 months before the BSP registered a very good

electoral result, comparable with the one it achieved in 2013. Ninova is average in terms of transactional leadership among the leaders in this study, well above Mikov.

## 5. Conclusions

This article has aimed to identify the sources of party members' assessment of leadership style. It analyzed several leader- or party-level variables in order to explain the variation in assessment across 12 parties in Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania between 2004 and 2018. In doing so, it is one of the few studies to have investigated party members' attitudes toward their leaders. The findings illustrate that the first leaders are perceived as more transformational by the members. The first leaders are among the elites who established the party, which means that they started from scratch and their behaviors have been crucial to organizational development and electoral performance. The first leaders establish an emotional connection with the members, especially with those who joined the party at its inception. Another result is that competitive internal elections encourage members to assess their leader as more transformational. Contestation and opposition pushes candidates to produce novel ideas that address existing problems and improve the party's functioning (Aylott & Bolin, 2017; Kenig, 2009). Such ideas can hardly be confined to transactions, since such approaches would be liable to receive criticism. Finally, this study illustrates that those leaders with extensive political experience within the party are considered more transformational, perhaps due to the higher level of professionalization over time, which is associated with several types of behaviors and performance (Chiru, 2020). None of the other variables influence the members' assessment of leadership styles.

These results have broader implications for leadership studies and party politics beyond the three cases examined here. These cases are illustrative for the universe of new democracies in which transformational party leadership is likely to occur, which means that their conclusions are generalizable to other, similar contexts. One of these implications is that the members' assessment of leadership styles is rooted in actions and features that are healthy for the party. Internal competition, unless it is taken to the extreme and generates severe conflict, can be a good way to produce meaningful changes in the party and promote competent people to key decision-making positions. Experience is often associated with expertise and understanding of how the party can be taken forward. A second empirical implication of these results is that members' views of transformational leadership can occur in any party, irrespective of their government or opposition status, size, or electoral gains. This means that political leaders with transformational styles are not only found in specific party profiles. Nevertheless, this study illustrates that leaders who establish a party have a head start in terms of members' assessment.

Two limitations of this study are the relatively low number of political parties covered in the analysis and the potential memory bias in assessing leaders who were in office in the 2000s. Further research can address both issues by increasing the number of political parties, either in these three countries, since many new parties have emerged since the survey was conducted, or in other Central and Eastern European countries. A members' survey on recent party leaders would enrich the universe of cases and go some way to resolving the memory bias issue. Including parties with several co-leaders could shed new light on the meaning of transformational leadership styles and be able to identify differences between those who share power within a party. Equally importantly, future studies could compare the perceptions of party leadership styles among party members and voters in order to understand whether the two groups converge. Such studies could add knowledge about the effects that leadership styles could have on occupying public office, which would explore

a reverse causal relationship than those pursued in the present article. Moreover, comparisons between public evaluations of party leaders and of prime ministers in office would be useful to understand whether the party position is more prominent or whether the highly visible government role of party leaders shapes the public's assessments of leadership.

### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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