

# Being Green in the East: The success and impact of Green parties in post-socialist countries

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## Abstract

This article examines the presence and activities of Green parties in governments of Central and Eastern Europe. In recent years, many ecologist parties and movements gained considerable electoral and general political success, especially in developed democracies of Western Europe. However, their ideological counterparts in new democracies tend to remain out of power and often out of parliament, albeit with a few notable exceptions. In this study, success of the Greens in CEE is operationalised through their impact on public spending and direct investments allocated to environmental protection. The hypothesis regarding the Greens' impact on spending is tested within the regression models, along with other potential predictors of government expenditure. The research results demonstrate a low significance of Greens in government participation and also their impact on budgetary allocation, contributing to the debate about the Green politics' position in the context of social and political cleavages in post-socialist societies.

**Keywords:** Green parties, public spending, environmental protection, Central and Eastern Europe

## Być zielonym na Wschodzie: sukces i wpływ partii Zielonych w krajach post-socjalistycznych

### Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł analizuje obecność i osiągnięcia partii Zielonych w gabinetach rządowych Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej. W ostatnich latach wiele partii i ruchów ekologicznych odniosło znaczne sukcesy wyborcze czy ogólnie polityczne, zwłaszcza w rozwiniętych demokracjach Europy Zachodniej. Jednak ich ideologiczne odpowiedniki w nowych demokracjach mają tendencję do pozostawania poza sferą władzy i często poza parlamentem, choć z kilkoma godnymi uwagi wyjątkami.

W niniejszym badaniu sukces Zielonych w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej jest operacjonalizowany poprzez ich wpływ na wydatki publiczne i inwestycje przeznaczone na ochronę środowiska. Hipoteza dotycząca wpływu Zielonych na wydatki jest testowana w modelach regresji, wraz z innymi potencjalnymi predyktorami wydatków rządowych. Wyniki wskazują na niskie znaczenie Zielonych, jeśli chodzi o udział w rządach, a także o wpływ na alokację budżetową, co pogłębia debatę na temat pozycji „zielonej” polityki w kontekście społecznych i politycznych podziałów w społeczeństwach post-socjalistycznych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** partie Zielonych, wydatki publiczne, ochrona środowiska, Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia.

Ever since the emergence of the Greens in Germany into the political mainstream during the 1980s, different environmentalist groups across Europe are trying to emulate that success and to grow from civil activism to the level of electoral and institutional actors. In Austria, Benelux countries, Scandinavia, and to some extent, France and Ireland, the Greens have managed to evolve from the political fringes and establish themselves as integral parts of the party systems (Poguntke 2002). This includes the continental level, where Green political group improved their cumulative result across several recent European parliament elections. Their activities, combined with the rising environmental awareness of developed societies, have led to the changes in the political mainstream, pushing other political parties to develop or adopt their own environmentalist political positions and policies (Carter 2013).

Situation seems to be different in the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe. Although Green parties in this wider region also evolved from the civil society (Hajba 1994) with some of them being established already in the early stages of post-communist party system formation, their success is more modest: they rarely enter governments, and when they do, it's usually as minor partners. Moreover, their general presence in the party dynamics is not yet firmly established. However, there are important exceptions, especially in the Baltic countries: for example Latvia appointed first "green" prime minister worldwide in 2004 (Van Haute 2016: p. 118), a move followed by the neighboring Lithuania in 2016.

Researchers mostly agree that the level of knowledge about the Green parties' impact on policy outcomes is low, deeming the issue understudied despite the surge of Green initiatives and parties across Europe. This is especially the case with their effect on distributive and spending policies (Röth, Schwander 2020: p. 661). The intention of this study is to examine the state of the Green/environmentalist/ecologist parties in selected CEE countries through the assessment of their impact on distributive policies, with the focus on budgetary components and expenditures in their main programmatic area, which is the environmental protection.

## Theoretical framework

The partisan effect on public spending is a well-known issue in political science, with many studies examining the spending patterns of developed liberal democracies (see:

Cameron 1978; Hicks, Swank 1984; Swank 1988; Potrafke 2011). While similar studies of post-socialist countries remain scarce, there is some evidence about the links between party variables or government composition and levels of budgetary expenditures (Careja, Emmenegger 2009; Bursać 2021). These studies found that the level and structure of public spending can to a certain extent be explained through the governments' party affiliations, with left parties being those who run expansive fiscal policies, while the right-wing parties strive to cut spending, due to their presumable commitment towards deregulation, privatisation or fiscal conservatism. Green parties are often considered to be a part of the higher spending governments, due to their assumptive leftist orientation, but their individual impact is almost never tested.

Some authors examined the effects of different political factors, including the presence of ecologist parties in the government, on different policy outputs. Scruggs (1999) studied the environmental performance, a variable defined through a set of indicators related to the pollution, but found a very weak correlation with the Greens' involvement in the government. Jahn (1998) established a similar low impact of the ruling Greens on levels of pollution and overall environmental performance during the 1980s and 1990s. Others tested the correlation in a more recent environment and with a different set of variables, including the Greens' effect on the country's compliance with the Kyoto protocol emission reduction targets (Jensen, Spoon 2011), concluding that parties that give higher priority to environment in their electoral manifestoes (but not exclusively the Greens) matter in reaching the Kyoto-prescribed goals.

A study by Röth and Schwander suggests that the Greens have a wider policy role, especially when participating in governments, where they serve as defenders of welfare state status quo, and sometimes even influence the increase of social transfers and social investments, thus providing ideological dimension to the issue of partisan impact on spending (Röth, Schwander 2020). However, these authors didn't find any specific outcomes related to the CEE-based Green parties, nor did they examine the effects of Greens on environmental component of public spending.

A number of significant studies also tried to explain the determinants of Greens' success, especially with regard to their strong electoral performance in several Western democracies. Most notable include post-materialist and prosperity theories, considering the generational gap (Inglehart 1990) or income levels and general wealth of society (Diekmann, Franzen 1999) as important generators of societal demand for environmental policies.

So how do environmentalist political parties in former socialist countries fit into these theories? Electoral results exhibit only a modest influence across the new democracies. Party preferences tend to be a result of demands from the electorate, and according to prosperity theories, rising levels of personal income and GDP per capita since the fall of communism should generate more space for the Greens. Correspondingly, solving basic cleavages from the early phases of transition, such as institutional and economic models, foreign policy orientation, ethnic tensions, attitude towards the recent past, etc. could imply the change in societies' priorities, possibly towards more post-materialist

values, including the environment. Along with that, there is a global public awareness shift of focus towards the environmental issues, caused by various disasters and impact of climate change, global warming, pollution and other environment-related problems on everyday life, further spurring the political demand. That demand should materialise in two ways: rising electoral performance of the Green parties resulting consequently in their government involvement, and more importantly, their policy impact. The first will be analyzed descriptively, while the second hypothesis, about the Green government participation leading to higher environmental spending, will be tested in several regression models, which will be explained in more detail in the following chapters.

### **Objects of the study: Who are the Greens in CEE?**

Our research sample covers 11 countries of Central and Eastern Europe: Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Croatia, Romania, and Bulgaria. They are selected according to several criteria. Most notably, these countries share a similar context of recent political and economic model development, going through the transition after the fall of communist regimes and developing in similar institutionalised paths, while joining the EU in a timeframe between 2004 and 2013. They also share a similar institutional setting, with parliamentary or premier-presidential system of government (Shugart 2005: p. 333–341), which in turn allows us to determine the direct influence of parliamentary-elected governments on budgetary policies, including the environmental spending. Finally, due to the cleavage structure and possible post-materialist value influx, these post-socialist countries could develop more political presence of environmentalist policies than the rest of post-socialist states, especially in contrast with the Western Balkans or the rest of the former Soviet Union (Carter 2013: p.78–79). At last, the data availability dictated the sample limitations, with most of the budget figures obtainable for the EU Member States. This factor also affected the timeframe of the research, extending from 1995 to 2020 for all 11 countries, creating a total of 286 observations in the sample.

How to define Green parties? According to Castles and Mair certain types of parties are more easily distinguishable from others (Castles, Mair 1984). Although these authors determined the distinction of leftist parties from the rest of the spectrum, primarily because of their typical name (usually containing the words left, socialist, social democrat, or worker), choreography and political positions, similar can be said for the Greens, which are also easy to label today. However, we should note that we seek only exclusively Green/environmentalist/ecologist parties for our study, defined as the "issue-owners", because of their spontaneous identification with these topics among the electorate (Spoon et al. 2014: p. 336). We acknowledge that political mobilisation of environmentalist policies in certain countries did not materialise in the form of the Greens, sometimes remaining in the civil society sphere, and in other cases, transferring environmentalism to the broader left parties, which then incorporated ecology in their programmes. These left-libertarian parties (Kitschelt 1989) will not be part of our research, which will focus solely on parties with dominant environmentalist

agenda. Carter (2013: p. 79) lists several criteria for identification of ecological parties, including the name, affiliation with the transnational party federation, party policy, and origins/social base. We will create the sample according to three of them: name, party policy, and the party family affiliation, most notably through the membership in the European Green Party and the Greens/EFA group in the European Parliament. Moreover, we shall only examine the effect of parties, which took part in the respective governments of their countries over the selected 1995–2020 timeframe (Casal Bertoa 2022).

In total, there are 37 annual observations (out of 286) of Greens participating in CEE governments, making up only about 13% of the sample. We will consider them briefly (see: Table 1). Czech Green Party took part in PM Topolanek's right-wing cabinet after the 2006 election, joining also the subsequent Fischer's grand coalition at the end of that parliament's term. The party fell below the threshold in the following 2010 election, never to return in the parliament again. In Slovakia, Greens were part of Dzurinda's winning coalition, which toppled the Mečiar's government in 1998 and remained in the cabinet for the full term, but found similar fate as their Czech counterparts in the following election, when they competed alone. In Romania, two small parties (Ecologist Party of Romania and Romanian Ecologist Federation) also participated in several coalition governments during their 1996–2000 parliamentary stint, although with the modest number of MPs (6 in total), elected in wider coalitions centered along anchor parties of the dominant left-right cleavage. Bulgarian Greens were also members of a larger electoral alliance, Coalition for Bulgaria, led by the Socialist Party in 2005, joining the subsequent Stanishev cabinet. However, they left the government in the last year of the term, due to the policy disagreements. Röth and Schwander (2020) also consider the Bulgarian Green Party as a member of the short-lived socialist-led government in 2013–2014, but although it nominally supported the coalition, the party didn't run any candidates on the list, and moreover, the government in question was a non-partisan technocratic cabinet.

**Table 1: Green parties' participation in governments of 11 CEE countries, 1995–2020.**

Country	Years
Czech Republic	2006–2010
Slovakia	1998–2002
Latvia	1995–1998; 2003–2011; 2014–2018
Lithuania	2016–2020
Romania	1996–2000
Bulgaria	2005–2008
Poland, Hungary, Estonia, Slovenia, Croatia	(none)

Source: Bursać 2018.

Beyond that, one could find a limited and occasional electoral success of Green parties in Slovenia, Estonia, and Hungary, but these actors never joined any ruling coalition of their respective countries in the denoted timeframe. It is also worth noting that every such

party in CEE holds the words "green" or "ecologist" in their name (Carter 2013: p. 79). Carter cites an example of the party LMP (hun. *Lehet Más a Politika* – Politics can be different) as an exception, but in 2020 they also added the "Hungarian Green Party" designation to their original name. Czech Pirate Party is a borderline case: even though they adopted environmentalist policies and joined the Greens/EFA group in the European Parliament, this party obviously differs in their main policy focus, programmatic foundations and societal origins from the rest of the Green family. Moreover, Pirates haven't participated in government until 2021, which is in any case outside of our analysed timeframe.

The trend of peripheral government participation of ecologists in CEE has two notable exceptions from the Baltic states. After minor involvement with multiple governments during the 1990s, Latvian Greens merged into the agrarian Union of Greens and Farmers, which spurred their success. Since 2002, they participated in most of the cabinets, and in 2004 appointed the first green prime minister worldwide, Indulis Emsis. Despite frequent governing coalitions with conservative and nationalist parties, they fell from power after the 2018 election, when they were ousted by a broad centre-right alliance. The second party in question is the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union, winner of the 2016 parliamentary election, which posted the prime minister in the following four-year term. It should be underlined that, despite their name, nominal environmentalist orientation and international affiliation (although the Latvians were members of Eurosceptic groups during their 2014–2019 term in the European Parliament, later joining the Global Greens international network), these two parties are sometimes described as populist or conservative (Auers 2012; Ramonaite 2020). Carter (2013: p. 85) considers them a good example that Green parties do not always adhere to the presupposed leftist ideological label, especially in the contextually divergent cleavage structure and political dynamics of the post-socialist Europe. According to that, their policy effect could also be very modest. Nevertheless, we will test whether the Greens' short stints in these cabinets had any impact on changes in environmental spending.

## Research design

The models will encompass two related dependent variables, as an operationalisation of the possible effect of environmentalist parties' presence in government. One of them is the general government expenditure on environmental protection (Eurostat 2022) defined as an annual fraction of national GDP; while the other is the sum of all annual direct environmental investments of general government in absolute numbers (millions of Euros), which includes all direct transfers for the protection of air, climate, soil, water, against radiation, and moreover waste and wastewater management, protection of biodiversity and landscapes, and environmental research and development (Eurostat 2022). In accordance with the general hypothesis, we expect that the Greens' participation in government should lead to the growth of these values. We consider the spending to be the most indicative area for exploring the partisan effect, since the policy impact by the Green parties participating in the government should directly materialise as the

change within the spending levels in these specific budgetary segments. Simply put, any successful policy initiative put forward by the Greens in their prime area of interest should demonstrate the increased allocation, hence increasing the level of transfers for the environment. It should be underlined that, while the data for general government expenditure is available for all sampled years (1995–2020), the investment variable is offered only for a fraction of cases, mostly in the last decade, so this significantly reduces the total number of observations in models testing the second dependent variable.

Other possible predictors will also be included in the models, having in mind that complex budgetary structures can be influenced by a number of factors. These presumably include economic variables, like the general public spending level, unemployment rate, GDP growth and the presence of IMF. While we assume that the rising spending levels and positive economic cycles will have a positive effect on the rise of environmental spending, the IMF-induced structural adjustments and situations of higher unemployment could result in cutting the expenses in other areas, like ecology. Political and institutional factors, such as electoral system and electoral year variable created due to the political budget cycle theory (Klomp, de Haan 2013) are also tested, as well as the level of countries' affiliation with the EU, bearing in mind that EU accession negotiations and subsequent membership could boost the resolving of various environmental issues in a candidate or a member country, which in turn leads to higher spending allocation. Another political variable is the general left-right orientation of the government (Bursac 2018). We presume that left-wing governments allocate more funds to the environmental protection, with leftist parties adopting more pro-environmental policies and generally being more receptive to the ecologist agenda (Rohrschneider 1993), while the right-wing parties tend to cut expenses and deregulate this segment.

Furthermore, we will test both the generational gap theory (Inglehart 1990) and wealth of society theory (Diekmann, Franzen 1999) in CEE context, operationalising them through the variable of share of population under the age of 15 in total demographics (World Bank 2022), as well as through the GDP per capita variable and level of post-socialist transformation of a society variable (Bertelsmann 2022). According to Inglehart, the fundamental change of values happens when younger population cohorts replace the older, gaining more ground for post-materialist values in a modern society. On the other hand, GDP per capita is a clear measure of higher standards of living, and the green voters are presumably members of the middle class (Carter 2013: p. 80), so the spread of prosperity could lead to a higher demand for environmentalist policies, even in the CEE countries, although most of these theories are primarily related to the post-industrial Western context. But it is nevertheless worth testing them within this new context.

## **Research results and discussion**

Basic descriptive statistics provided us with unexpected results from the very start. The differences in average environmental spending between governments with and without the Greens' participation are skewed in the direction of non-ecologist cabinets,

with lower levels of spending enacted when Green parties were in power (see: Table 2). These differences are much more pronounced when comes to the environmental investments, with direct financing of non-Green governments reaching tenfold value in absolute numbers (millions of Euros). The comparison is somewhat elusive, precisely because it is presented in absolute values, so the countries with larger economies can also offer the highest amount of investments to the environmental department. For example, the biggest direct investment spender by far is Poland, with almost 9 billion Euros funneled during the nine-year period of available investment data, but the country, as stated before, never developed a viable Green actor in its party system. However, the average value of investments relative to the annual GDP is also presented, in order to exclude the impact of the size of the economy, and this indicator also stipulates higher spending of non-Green cabinets.

**Table 2: Average environmental spending and investments in 11 CEE countries, 1995–2020.**

<b>Green parties' participation in the government</b>	<b>Average environmental spending % GDP</b>	<b>Average environmental investments (mln Eur)</b>	<b>Average environmental investments % GDP</b>
Greens in government	0.61%	36.94	0.1%
Governments without Green parties	0.71%	319.44	0.25%

Source: Eurostat 2022.

We have also created similar descriptive comparison between governments depending on whether they involve a Green party, but only for those CEE countries, in which sustainable environmentalist parties developed, presuming that maybe in others some supplementary political actor has taken over the environmentalist agenda, but results were always similar. Namely, average annual spending was slightly skewed to non-Green cabinets, while direct investments were noticeably higher, when power was not shared with the Green parties (on average, 0.1% of GDP in comparison with 0.27%). Moreover, left and right governments in the whole sample spend similar amounts of budgets on green issues: 0.64% of GDP on average for the left, and 0.69% for the right; and 0.23% of GDP for direct environmental investments for both of them, which excludes the possible green agenda takeover by the left as a potential explanation for spending patterns in which the Greens in government actually have the negative effect. Basic correlations and variance analysis tests also confirm these conclusions.

With these surprising results, the expectations from our regression models were lowered, anticipating to provide more explanatory power to other possible predictors of spending. First model (see: Table 3) is reporting the factors of influence on environmental expenditure as a fraction of the annual GDP. While Greens in cabinet again indicate a negative impact, albeit below the values of statistical significance, several other fac-



tors demonstrate expected coefficient values. For example, rises in general spending naturally have a positive impact on environmental allocation. Furthermore, countries in arrangements with the IMF have cut the environmental expenditures, presumably with the ecologist issues being low on the policy agenda during the restructuring packages. The IMF proves to be a variable with the highest level of statistical significance, although we should underline that the explanatory power of the whole model is rather small. On the other hand, it seems that generational gap and wealth of society apparently do not matter when comes to the environmental spending in CEE context. Share of younger population, GDP per capita, and a level of transformation variables do not display a statistical significance. One of the surprising factors of impact is the use of closed list electoral systems (as opposed to all other more open variants in use in CEE, including the open list, preferential voting or mixed-member). In closed list proportional representation, decision making is more centralised, with not many funding requests coming from autonomous representatives – members of parliament seeking more allocation in order to fulfill the demands of their respective constituencies. In this setting, the more centralised closed list systems provide for more budgetary allocation, which goes contrary to the general expectation of autonomous political demand, but the result could also point to the fact that environmental issues are not a subject of a pork barrel struggle for territorial allocation, but are the result of decisions made on the central level of government.

**Table 3: Variables affecting the environmental spending levels**

Variable reported	Coefficient value and statistical significance
Greens in government	-.080
total public spending %GDP	.023**
IMF presence	-.146**
GDP per capita	-.000
share of population under 15	-.019
closed list PR	.096**
EU membership	.038
dependent variable: environmental spending % GDP	
* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01	
N = 286, R <sup>2</sup> = 0.16	

Source: Own research.

The EU membership result is also surprising, expecting that environmental spending should increase with the negotiation process insisting on solving some of the ecological issues before the candidate country joins, and moreover with full membership bringing common policies and access to various funds. However, the descriptive statistics also reveals small differences with regard to annual spending share, although the members' average expenditure levels are somewhat higher. The real difference is found in the levels

of direct investments, with EU members spending substantially more than candidate countries (see: Table 4).

**Table 4: Average environmental spending and investments in 11 CEE countries, related to their EU integration status**

EU integration status	Average environmental spending % GDP	Average environmental investments (mln Eur)	Average environmental investments % GDP
EU member	0.74%	285.53	0.23%
EU candidate	0.64%	71.5	0.11%
non-EU	0.63%	/	

Source: Eurostat 2022.

The previously reported data also called for the regression models analysing effects on direct environmental investment level. However, the creation of such models with available set of variables proved to be a hard task: only the negative coefficient value of the Greens in government variable proved to be statistically significant, meaning that ruling coalitions which excluded Green parties made more direct investment in the alleviation of environmental challenges (on average, 0.25 index points). All other political, institutional, economic, demographic, societal or EU-related factors of influence did not demonstrate anything close to a statistical significance in any of the models tested, or moreover almost any correlation with the dependent variable, meaning that explanation for investment levels lies elsewhere.

Apart from that, we also tested different models, including the ones with countries, in which Green parties developed; only post-2000 observations due to the different policy priorities in early transition period; as well as models containing only Lithuanian and Latvian observations, because of the long presence of nominally green parties in both party systems and governments of these countries, in contrast with the more transient nature of environmentalist parties elsewhere in the CEE. In all these cases, results were almost identical as in the general model, so the findings are not reported in detail. Green party effect on annual spending was always negative but without much statistical significance, the generational gap and wealth of society theories have not been confirmed in post-socialist CEE context, and individual economic factors (IMF, GDP) proved to be the most important predictors of environmental spending, while the EU membership had only a limited explanatory power.

## Conclusions

Findings indicate that the involvement of Green parties in governments has no significant effect on the increase of environmental spending, raising the issue of Greens' impact in Central and Eastern Europe. It could seem that environmentalist values in these countries are not yet firmly rooted in social cleavage structures and subsequently, in

party systems. This is further supported by a very modest and inconsistent electoral performance of environmentalist parties across the wider region. Two exceptions, Latvian and Lithuanian agrarian Greens, despite their departure from the presumed left-liberal orientation, also corroborate the general findings. Namely, in both Lithuania and Latvia, environmental spending patterns seem unrelated to the Greens' participation in ruling coalitions.

Hypotheses regarding the impact of higher living standards or higher share of younger population leading to more demand for ecological policies also lacked evidence. Young people in richer societies of the CEE are not a factor that creates a demand for environmental policies and consequent budgetary spending, although they are the most probable voters of these parties. But since the parties don't demonstrate the impact, so is the case with their voters. However, this could pose an interesting point for any future research of the value influx in former socialist societies, especially with the apparent lack of political demand for environmentalist, and maybe even wider post-materialist values.

These general conclusions draw the question of Green values in the context of former socialist societies. The environmental budgets seem unattached from ideological struggle and social cleavages. Infusion of post-materialist values and ongoing global rise of awareness about pollution and climate change could change this in the future, but for now, the success and the impact of the Greens remains modest, if existent at all. Environmental spending seems to be more contingent on other factors. Annual fiscal decisions in this budgetary segment are, apart from several identified economic and institutional predictors, probably dependent on factors found outside of the assumed explanatory framework of this study. Some authors have argued that the governments' engagement in green policies is determined mostly by the public opinion, meaning that the decision makers allocate budgets in the direction of environment only when there is a strong public pressure to do so, which could be a result of some urgent issue, like a disaster or an accident (see: Mitchell 1990; Regens, Elliott 1992; Ruszkowski, Żurek 2021). But nevertheless, it seems that at least in some countries this pressure was transformed into a political platform, creating Green political actors whose impact is reflected in budgetary allocation, among other things (for example, in Germany: see Witkowska 2020). For most of the CEE countries, however, this scenario remains distant: Greens in the East are mostly modest in their reach and transient and unsustainable as major party actors, reaching the decision making positions rarely. Nevertheless, party systems, as well as cleavage structures, tend to evolve, sometimes very quickly. It will be interesting to follow whether future developments will spur the demand for environmentalist policies, and whether this potential demand could materialise in the form of independent Green parties or already existing actors claiming the agenda. These trends could differ from country to country, irrelevant to their shared regional similarities.

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